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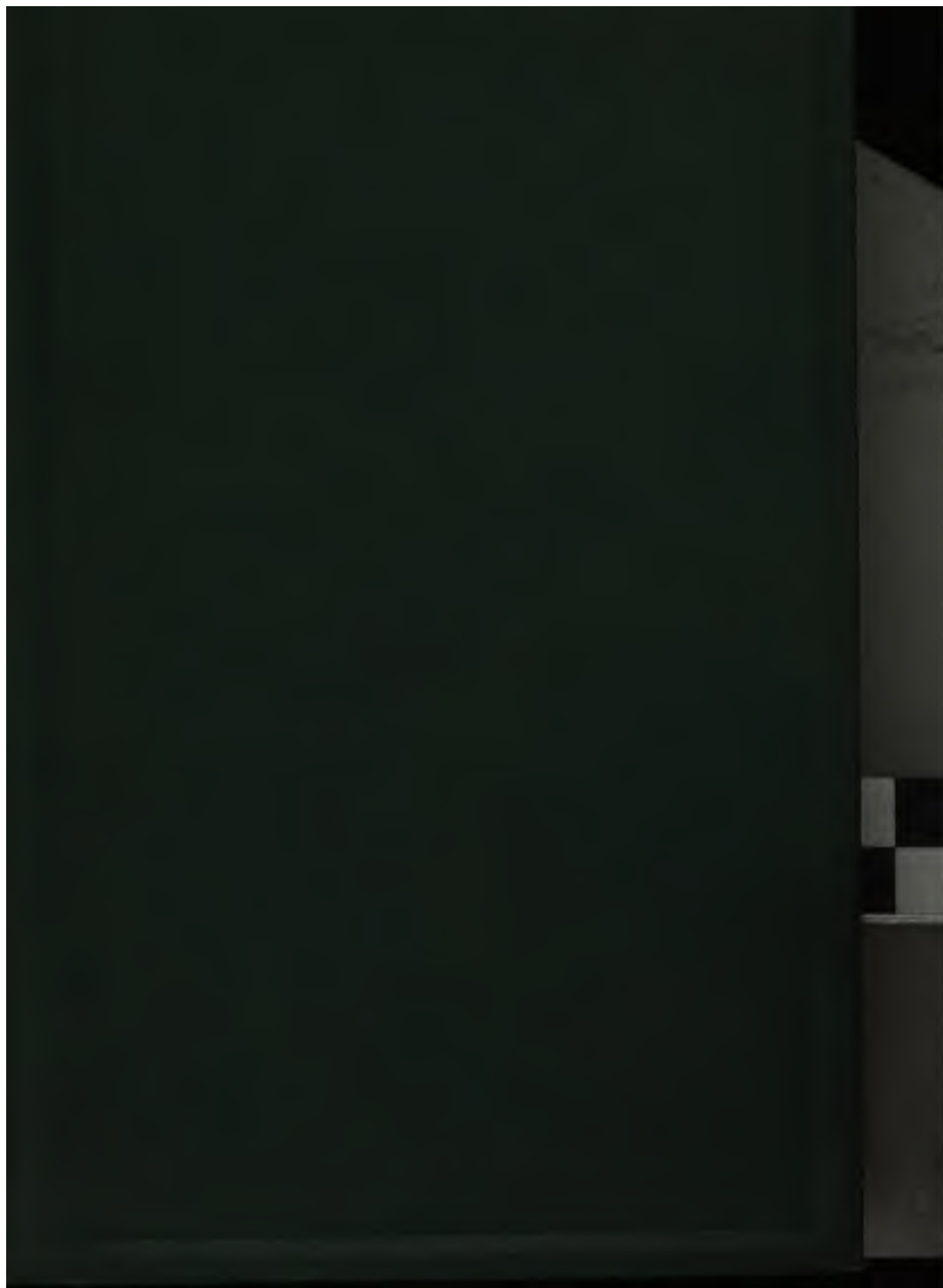
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ROUGH HEWN.

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HURST AND BLACKETT, PUBLISHERS, 13 GREAT MARLBOROUGH STREET.

ROUGH HEWN.

BY

MRS. DAY,

AUTHOR OF

"FROM BIRTH TO BRIDAL,"

&c. &c.

"There's a divinity that shapes our ends
Rough hew them how we will."



IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

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BOOK I.

A boy's will is the wind's will,
And the thoughts of youth are long, long thoughts.

LONGFELLOW.

ROUGH HEWN.

CHAPTER I.

“THERE is Ned at last,” said Mrs. Barton, laying down her sewing at the sound of coming steps. Her words fell into the silence of the little parlour, like a stone gently dropped into water, and, like it, they seemed to make soft but still certain and increasing circles about them. The fire seemed to shoot up a brighter flame, and the setter on the hearthrug stretched his legs, looked at his mistress with loving brown eyes, sleepily wagged his tail, and disposed himself once more to rest.

Mr. Barton, half lying, half sitting in an arm-chair, with a newspaper across his knee, drew

himself together at his wife's words, sat up, slowly took the pipe from his mouth, blew a long cloud from his lips and nostrils, and said, with a little laugh,

"My dear, mothers have proverbial care for their children's goings and comings, and you are a model mother, but neither I nor Victor hear anything. It's not the boy."

But Mrs. Barton was right. The firm, ringing footsteps came nearer and nearer. Victor sat up, spreading his paws, and cocking his silky brown ears.

"It is Ned," Mrs. Barton said, and looked at the wooden clock on the mantel-piece. "Half-past eleven! How late it is, Mark! I suppose he has been in the town. What takes him there?"

A look of uneasiness crossed the face, still handsome, in spite of care and sorrow. Once more Mr. Barton puffed out a cloud of smoke, and as the garden gate clicked into its place he shrugged his shoulders.

"What am I to say to him, Mark?" Mrs. Barton asked, softly, but anxiously.

In another moment the door was opened, and

Ned Barton walked into the room. He seemed to bring the brightness and sweetness of the October night in with him. A smile was on his mouth, his cheek was ruddy, and his eyes bright. The anxious look passed away from his mother's face.

"Sitting up for me, mother?" he said, cheerfully, and leaning over her chair. "Why will you? You could leave me some bread and cheese. You ought to go to bed—you are so early in the morning."

Then he stooped and caressed the dog that fawned about him.

"You are late," said his father. "It is not fair to keep your mother up."

"Yes. I am very sorry—but—I will turn in now, so good night, father and mother."

He bent his head to kiss her, but she said, gravely,

"Wait—I have something to say to you."

"I shall go to bed, then," said Mr. Barton, "and leave you and your mother to have your talk out. I must be early, whatever anyone else is."

Mrs. Barton set bread and cheese and beer

before her son, silently folded up her work, and set the room to rights, in readiness for the morning. When he had finished his meal, and turned his chair to the fire, she sat down beside him.

"What has made you so late?" she began. "Where have you been, Ned? In Riverford, I suppose? With whom?"

"Yes. Time goes so fast, I had no idea it was so late. I am sorry to have kept you up."

"It is not that. But what have you been doing?"

"Playing billiards. I hate the Brewery and my work. One must have some amusement. Goodness knows there is little enough in this deadly-lively place!"

"You have as much amusement as"—"we have" she was going to say, but she looked at her son in the pride of health and strength, and, like many another woman, thought perhaps he required more amusement than such as she did, so she added—"as you can get, considering our position. But playing billiards means losing, does it not?"

"Oh! not much. Besides, I don't always lose, and I am improving greatly."

"And I suppose you drink something, for the good of the house?"

"Oh! one need not drink if one does not like."

"And where does the money come from when you lose?"

The young man coloured and moved uneasily in his chair, but he answered nothing.

"Where does it come from? You have none to lose, and you must repay the people you play with. Is it true that Gilbert Drake has lent you money?"

He coloured more deeply than before, struck his hand upon his knee, and turning, faced his mother.

"Yes, it is true; but how did you know?—has he told it of me? I have paid him nearly all. What a blackguard to tell! He knows very well I shall pay him."

"When? When you win? Ah! but Drake did not tell, your uncle was told that you were constantly at the 'Lion,' and that it was supposed that Drake paid, as you could not possibly meet your losses. Your uncle came to speak to us, he says you are not going on stead-

ily, and that, if you do not mend, he cannot keep you in the business."

"I am sure I don't want him to do so. I hate it!"

"Why? It would be very serious to have you at home, thrown upon our hands, and idle."

"It is so slow; just one grind and drive all day. Plodding along to make a few shillings, and sticking over a desk and a ledger through fine days and wet ones. I had rather be my father, out over the land; there is some fun and stir in that."

"It is idle talking, you know you cannot get such a place as your father's, and that you ought to support yourself; besides, you might think of your sisters, and try to add some help for them."

"By Jove! but I do think of them, and sorry enough I am for them, and you; but the more I think, the more worried I get, and my sisters seem like a weight hung round my neck."

"Then you go to the 'Lion,' to get rid of the thoughts?"

"Just so. I tell you what it is, mother, everything is wrong together, and I don't see

what is to right it all. It makes me mad to think of you, a lady, slaving here, with only a charwoman now and then to help you; up early and late, washing, and baking, and mending, and more often than not in a ragged gown."

"And my boy's earnings go in billiards at the 'Lion.'"

"But I might win something worth having—something that might help you," said Ned ruefully.

"You play with cleverer men than yourself. Winnings are not for you. Stick to your work—that at least is a certainty, if you only take pains."

"Just as likely as you think my winning at billiards. I don't like office work, and don't think I am fit for it."

"What are you fit for? Can you suggest any reasonable occupation for yourself?"

"What am I fit for, indeed?" echoed Ned. "I have had little enough schooling. I can shoot, and I can fish. I can drive a horse, and break a dog." He stretched his long powerful arms across the table, and studied them attentively,

opening and shutting his well-shaped but large muscular hands.

"I might be a blacksmith, perhaps," he said at last; "I have as much book-learning as would serve me for that; certainly not as much as the charity boys in Riverford School. I suppose I may thank my father for that; he has been good-natured and lazy all his life, and his children suffer. What on earth did you marry him for, mother?"

"Hush! I will not hear a word against your father. You bring your complaint, after all, home to me; you would fain lay the blame of all your difficulties and disagreeables on any shoulders but your own; and you go and drown troublesome thoughts in questionable company. The brave man conquers his trouble, and sets a stern face against all temptations. Nothing is impossible to overcome."

Ned Barton looked at his mother, at her worn face and early changing hair, and thought of the patient heroism with which she endured the difficulties and disagreeables of her life. But he did not call it heroism. Ned was not a specially thoughtful youth; had he been call-

ed upon to reflect about his mother, he would probably have arrived at the ill-expressed and lame conclusion that she was by nature patient and uncomplaining, that he had never seen her otherwise, and that he supposed women could do without amusements and comforts better than men could—at any rate, that, as far as his experience went, they certainly did so. He sat now vaguely turning this proposition over in his mind, hardly conscious that he was engaged upon it, and at the same time contemplating his hands and arms. Presently Ned spoke, for the silence chilled him, even more than the want of fire.

Mrs. Barton had raked together the bright fire lighted for her husband, but it had died out.

“Nothing is left but cinders,” he said. “Shall I make up a fresh fire for you, mother?—if not, we had better go to bed. You have no more to say to me? It comes to this, that I must try and make the best of circumstances, as you do, and stick to my ledgers, worse luck. I will try and please you, mother,” he said, more affectionately than he had yet spoken, for he dearly loved her, “but I am not the least like

my uncle Charles—he can plod along, and has done well, and is kind enough to me, for that matter; but he forgets that I am young, and he is getting old——”

“Uncle Charles was no extraordinary man—not cleverer than you,” she interrupted; “but a chance offered itself in his life—he took it, and made it serve him; and you know very well his intentions towards you. It would be a comfort to us to know you are provided for; and you would like to be partner ultimately in so good a business, Meantime——”

“It would be nice enough were I a partner now; but, oh! the weary way there!” and he stretched his arms over his head. “Well, I suppose one must have a try for it.”

“Don’t go yet,” she said, “I have something more to say. Your uncle fears you are not steady; he does not like the Drakes, and thinks them too fast and flashy—too flush of money for a young man like you, who must work; he says they lead you into bad company, and bade me warn you.”

“I am sure he is very civil to them himself.”

“Very likely—they are well-to-do fellow-

townsmen, and he runs no risk from them ; they do not take him to billiard-tables, and dancing and singing parties. Ned," she said at last, stopping short, "your uncle told me that Gilbert Drake has a pretty young servant up from Hertfordshire, and that you have been seen talking to her, and she has walked out with you. This is very unwise, both for you and for her ; be advised in time—these things end ill. Give me your word you will not go to Drake's—keep out of the girl's way—it is the only safety. She is not of your class ; you might have other friends."

"What is my class ?" asked the young man, moodily. "She is very pretty and very gentle. I cannot see why I may not say a civil word to her, without setting everyone talking."

"Don't be angry. I spoke to warn you. You cannot afford to commit follies, and your bread depends upon your good conduct. About your class, do not forget that your mother is a lady, that her family and friends are respectable, and there is nothing to prevent your being a gentleman, in an honourable position. Besides, there are people here quite ready to befriend

and receive you, who have never looked coldly upon us because we have not been very fortunate or successful in life."

"People who patronise you, and give you cast-off clothes, and books they don't want, and when they have no one better at hand, take you and the girls out to drive. You all look like ladies, I admit, and don't shame them; but I—I don't like being patronised, and I am not sure that I look like a gentleman."

Once more he studied his hands and arms, and his gaze wandered to his long legs, but he gave no heed to the blush and sigh of his mother at his words.

"No, I don't think I do look like a gentleman; I am not sure that I feel like one. I have sometimes thought I would enlist, and have done with my self-government. I hate books and figures, and hanging on to the skirts of gentility, under a false pretence."

Mrs. Barton laid her hand upon his shoulder.

"Promise me you will not enlist, I can trust your word. The life of a common soldier is more terrible than books and figures. And promise me you will not go to Gilbert Drake's, unless your father sends you."

He smiled at her anxiety, but he gave the promise she asked, unhesitatingly.

“Work becomes less distasteful with use,” she said. “Keep a brave heart, my boy—things will go better for you. You are better than you say. Besides, there is always the word *must* before you. I see no other or better arrangement. Think of what I have said, and remember that difficulties are best surmounted in silence. God bless you !”

She kissed him, and let her cheek remain a moment against his, and he felt it wet with tears. He knew that, notwithstanding her few and quietly-spoken words, she cared for and felt for him. He knew she could not alter matters, but was right. The word *must* was before him. When she left him he knew that she would kneel and pray, as he had seen her many a time, and that her prayers would be for him.

He leaned against the mantel-piece, and looked round upon the poorly-furnished room. Its aspect had never so struck him before, and his pleasure-loving nature rose in rebellion against his fate. His mind wandered from the every-day household annoyances that fretted

him, to his mother's self-denying habits. His eyes saw the little jug of beer drawn for him ; he knew his mother never drank any. Her homely work-basket stood on a table in the corner, full of his own and his father's socks, her scissors and thimble lay on the top ; he had seen dainty gold thimbles, and silver-sheathed scissors in Riverford, made for other women's use. Then he shivered ; this October night, there was a bright, healthy frost outside, but it was chilly in the ill-built cottage, and he remembered that when she kissed him her cheek and hands were cold ; when his father went to bed she would not have the fire made up for her. Poor mother ! he pitied her, but he pitied himself much more, in an inconclusive way, for he scarcely reached *thought* about the matter.

By-and-by he shook himself, and walked up to bed, his mind recurring to his promise to his mother, and he repeated her words with a sense that they were true, even prophetic—"These things end ill." He protested to himself that his uncle was hard upon him, that he was no worse than other young men, but still he meant to keep his promise, with a mental reservation, *if it were*

possible. Few people are aware of the frequency of this mental reservation, only self-conscious, conscientious, or introspective people detect it lurking in its corner. Ned Barton was not one of this class ; he took no account of his ways or thoughts ; just now he was cold and sleepy, life did not wear a smiling aspect, but was severe and stern. He would go to sleep, and forget that there were things that ended ill.

CHAPTER II.

“**W**HAT did you marry my father for?” Edmund Barton had asked, in his hasty but impotent discontent with his state of life.

Maria Fielding had married Mark Barton because she loved him. The answer was an easy one, but it would hardly have satisfied the young man at that moment, when the close-fitting collar of existence was galling him.

Captain Fielding, the father of Mrs. Barton, had served with some distinction in the last war with France. A bullet had passed through his cheek, which, together with sundry sabre-wounds, disabled him from further service, and entitled him to a pension, and a quiet life, for the rest of his days. He returned home bronzed,

and somewhat injured in powers of articulation, soldierly and erect in his bearing, cheerful and easy-going in disposition.

During her husband's campaigning Mrs. Fielding had lived with her father on his small property at Altcaster, which she, his only child, inherited on his death, and which, assisted by an old farm-bailiff, she managed so well that Captain Fielding, on his return, left her absolute mistress, smiled at her imperious ways, and never interfered with her arrangements. Probably he knew he could not have performed all the small and wearisome duties belonging to farm and homestead half as well as she did ; at any rate, he never tried ; he often said that some women had a talent for government. Butter and milk were better in quality, and more unfailing in supply ; eggs and poultry, wanting elsewhere, were always to be found at Mrs. Fielding's. No garden or orchard yielded such crops ; there were no such moss and cabbage roses, nor carnations, in the county as hers ; nowhere so dainty and bountiful a tea-table, with cream in which the spoon would stand upright, light hot cakes, preserves, and quaintly-

plaited rolls, for her daughter's young friends, or such a well-fed goose and capital game-pie, with strong ale, and currant or elder wine, for an old comrade of her husband's. She was up early and late, and the clap-clap of her small high-heeled shoe in fine weather, and of her pat-tens in wet, was heard all day in yard, and garden, and dairy. She was an educated woman, too. The books she read were few, but good, and she read them well; and in her father's declining years she had read to him the journals that teemed with foreign news and home politics; she had mastered some Latin, to please his scholarly tastes, and some French, which she could not speak, to understand the daily history of the great nation that then occupied so much of the world's attention. Of poetry she knew but little, protesting it was sad stuff, and wasted one's time; yet on her shelves was a copy of Walter Scott, considerably thumbed, and under the cover of her work-basket lay a little volume of Byron. Her accomplishments were few. She could not draw a line, but she was a born dancer; not a note could she play on the harpsi-

chord or piano, but she could sing many a sweet old ballad; and Edmund Fielding, stationed with his regiment at Altcaster, thought he had never heard a clearer voice than hers in the old church, or seen a brighter face, and a daintier pair of ankles, as she passed him after service in the churchyard. He made the best of his opportunities, and finally married the young lady; and, when he went to the Continent, left her under her father's roof, with a son and daughter.

Captain Fielding came home, to be caressed and half worshipped in his own household, and cordially welcomed by all former friends and acquaintances. He had a pleasant time of it, reading the journals and gazettes, a never-failing source of interest; sitting in the deep arm-chair by the fire, or in the arbour under the clematis and jessamine, with the thrushes singing about him; walking on the Summer evenings and Sunday afternoons with his wife; shooting or fishing with his son during his holidays; gardening now and then, and strolling or riding with his daughter. To ride with his daughter was the great pleasure of his

life. In his own way, deep in his heart, he sang his *nunc dimittis* on such occasions. Maria was very beautiful, and she was very good. She had been carefully reared by her mother, who was a God-fearing woman, though she made no loud professions of faith. She was useful and housewifely, could sew, and mend, and bake, and at a good school she had acquired a few accomplishments. In many ways she resembled her mother; she had inherited, too, her deep blue eyes and dark brown hair, with the regularity of her features; but in disposition she was like her father—easily pleased, sweet-tempered and kindly, and she had his tall figure and erect carriage.

Captain Fielding's especial delight was to ride with Maria slowly through the High Street of Altcaster; and to watch the looks of admiration, of envy, and of affection directed to her was better than a mayor's feast to him. In her dark green riding-habit, with a white felt hat, something of the "brigand shape," as it is called, her graceful figure bending to the motion of her horse, her brown curls fluttering in the wind, she was a very lovely creature.

Some people said she was cold, apathetic, some even that she was proud. She certainly was neither passionate nor demonstrative, and she had been trained in that old school of manners which taught that a woman should be retiring, gentle, and patient of rebuke. Well for Maria in after-years that it had been so. But she had spirit too, and was not easily tired nor frightened, and when she knew her company well, could answer with repartee, and hold her opinions with some wit.

Not a heroine of modern fashion ; but may it not have been that, in those days when the men were rougher, coarser, more adventurous, and lived more stirring lives, risking more dangers, the women, to have any influence with them, were perforce of a milder, gentler strain? In these days, when men—God help them!—love their ease and seek their comfort as the first good, things are altered, and it is left for women to prove the mettle of their pasture, to be self-denying to asceticism, or bold and daring to fastness and slang.

Perhaps the happiest night of Captain Fielding's life was when Maria first appeared at the

county ball at Riverford. She made what would now be called a sensation ; she was the most desirable partner of the evening, and she was the toast after supper. After that event she went to stay in Dublin and in London, with old family friends. Several eligible, highly respectable, moneyed, cultivated men distinguished her by their admiration and attentions, but she returned from her visits disengaged to Altcaster.

One morning the town was thunderstruck at hearing that this lovely and distinguished girl had plighted her faith to Mark Barton. Mark Barton was, so to speak, nobody. Mrs. Fielding was surprised, displeased, and thrown off her balance at first ; but she found Maria was in earnest, and, as her dignity and self-respect ill brooked any comments of her neighbours, she set herself to make the best of the matter with all possible decorum, and treated her future son-in-law with the greatest consideration.

Durrant Fielding fumed and fretted, vowed he had better projects for his sister, wrote her a peppery letter or two ; went down from London, where his regiment was quartered, to Alt-

caster, in order to upbraid her, came into personal communication with young Barton, and liked him.

But Captain Fielding took it to heart and was bitterly disappointed; his darling, his beauty, might have married Lord Riverford himself, and not been the party honoured by the connection. He said very little about the matter; he would not have crossed or grieved his daughter for the world, but the joy and glory were gone out of his life. About that time he met with a serious accident, while out shooting, which disabled him for some weeks; but still it was said Maria's modest choice of a husband had shortened her father's days. He died soon after Maria's marriage, and she never in the least suspected that he had suffered through her actions. Mrs. Fielding knew how sore had been the disappointment, and used her influence with himself, and her unapproachable pride with others, to help him to bear it, but with poor success. She felt her husband's death acutely. People said she was too proud and cold to feel anything; yet she never laid aside her mourning, and she never named him without reverently bending her head.

Mark Barton, for whom Maria Fielding had thus ruthlessly cast aside family pride and personal advancement, was the elder son of a well-to-do yeoman of East Anglia. Both his parents died at middle age, and he found himself at twenty-three owner of an excellent farm, corn-land and pasture, and some pretty scrubby woods, carpeted in Summer by primroses, blue-bells, and lilies of the valley, and tenanted by rabbits, against which he and his brother waged perpetual war. There was some money, too, from both father and mother, lying at the bank in Altcaster; and Charles Barton, the younger, made the most of his capital, and became a partner in the Brewery of Simmonds and Company, in Riverford. Mark kept the farm, and worked it. He and his brother had received a fair education, and were thought well of.

Mark was really handsome, with blue eyes and curly brown hair, regular features, and an open, kindly expression. His figure was well knit and active, his voice and smile were charming, and his manners had that indefinable tone of good breeding that bespoke him one of Nature's gentlemen, though by courtesy only he wrote Esquire after his name.

Courtesy begets courtesy; he was himself kind and courteous, and he met with the like treatment from others. He made acquaintances, and began to be received in houses where his parents had not been guests; he rode a good horse; he was an excellent shot; he crossed no one's preserves, and interfered with no one's prejudices; his fences were in good order, his farming was neat, he improved his farm buildings and cottages; he stood very well in the good graces of the county gentlemen, and was decidedly a favourite with the ladies. At the races or the flower-show, at the covert side, who so welcomed as young Mark Barton by all the pretty women? As an escort through Riverford on a market-day, who so desirable, so tender to their fears of horned beasts and loose horses, so firm in his repression of the rude, coarse drovers?

Durrant Fielding and he had known each other from boyhood, and as they grew up they chatted familiarly, when they met in the High Street, of Riverford or Altcaster. Maria saw Mark first on some such occasion. No one noticed their acquaintance; but when she was

eighteen, he found that certain implements or seeds were to be obtained of a better class in Altcaster than in Riverford ; he preferred the Altcaster market, and he made fast friends with two of the officers in Altcaster Barracks. He often saw Maria, and he found favour in her sight. Rallied by her friends on her engagement to the young farmer, rated by her family, she maintained that her lover was a gentleman. She was proud of his beauty, and his manliness, and his good manners, instancing many acts of kindness and generosity done by him, and his conversation, free from the coarse and flippant words then so common, in proof of her assertion ; and at last silenced all further interference by declaring that she would rather live in a barn with him than at Windsor with anyone else. They suited each other ; suitability is the secret of a peaceful, harmonious life.

Mark Barton took his wife home to the Warrens, and never did two young creatures begin a happier life. Maria had been used to a quiet countrified home, and to housekeeping ; she rode, and drove, and walked about with her

husband. It was nothing to her to wear no feather in her hat, and to exchange her silk gown for a stuff or linen one; so Mark loved her, what mattered all the rest? She kept, too, her former friends and associates, visiting them occasionally, though finding it neither convenient nor agreeable to go often to dinners and entertainments.

Many women placed in Mrs. Barton's position might have been patronized or dropped by early acquaintances: but she was too truly a gentlewoman, too simple and unassuming for either course of conduct, and the singular harmony that reigned at the Warrens made it attractive in many eyes. The ideal was not very exalted, the expectation not very great, and the happiness of Mark and Maria Barton not very extraordinary; but such as it was, it really existed.

The problem of happiness must ever have attractions for the human heart; curiously will it watch the development, anxiously study the bases and proofs of the existence of happiness, whether envy, or incredulity, or true sympathy dictate its observation. The fact of such ex-

istence in the present case was amply proved during the evil days that came upon the young couple. When the storm beat upon their home, it fell not, for it was founded on a rock.

CHAPTER III.

AT first Mark was attentive and prudent in all his operations, but he was so content at heart that he became content with everything else; and his naturally easy temper had a lurking danger of becoming supine. When Maria was at his side, little was to be feared for him—she was graver and firmer than he was, and he trusted her judgment. But when their third child was born, Maria fell ill, and Mark, thinking to spare her anxiety, did not tell her of the great increase of his expenditure for her, nor of some serious losses he had had with his cattle; and, above all, he did not tell her that the capital he had had in the Altcaster Bank was all gone—year by year he had drawn upon it, and his hopeful though indolent nature

always led him to expect a good turn, when he might replace it. Had Maria known, she would at once have cut down expenses, but he could not bear to *injure* her, as he called it, and always quieted his own fears by saying, "This and that were such trifling things," and that "there were good as well as bad times."

On the outside things were smooth and sound as usual. When Maria was well enough to move about, she went to stay with her mother at Altcaster, taking her little fair-haired daughters with her. Mark came backwards and forwards—fifteen or twenty miles is no great distance in the country with a good horse under one, but sometimes Maria thought he looked tired, and that the ride was too much for him. The Winter had been against him, and in the Spring, when he wanted to do some draining, there was no spare money, and he borrowed it—borrowed more than he wanted, and got it easily, and as easily parted with the surplus; for driving into Altcaster, to fetch his wife home, feeling brighter and happier than he had done for some time past, he met one of the officers of the dépôt, and, in course of conversation, after

mentioning some difficulty about a charger, the officer asked Barton, "like a good fellow," as he was, "to lend him fifty pounds." Glad to do the good office, and having the money in his pocket, Barton lent it, receiving an I O U in exchange, with a promise to pay in six months. The six months made themselves twelve, and again another twelve, before Barton heard more of his money, and then it was too late to do him material service.

Mark lived on, staving off with difficulty trouble and pressure, and fearing to tell Maria his position, because it had been so long untold. At last she suddenly became aware of it. Having asked for repairs to be done to the house, he proposed to sell some stock to pay for it. She knew he had not taken as much stock at the last fair as had been his custom, and this expedient struck her with affright. She guessed all now. For a moment she was staggered, and turned very pale, thinking of the children at her knees ; but she recovered herself. Firmly and gravely she listened to the whole tale which poor Mark, with his head in her lap, to hide his brimming

eyes, was only too thankful to be able to confide to her, and to ease himself of half the burden by sharing it with her. She heard his tale to the end, but whilst he was speaking, her more capable mind was forming a plan for immediate action. She did not blame him, but she said no caressing, weakening words—he must meet his difficulties boldly, and she must strengthen his hands. Acting upon her advice, he brought his brother Charles home one evening from Riverford, and laid his case before him. Charles had made money, and loved it accordingly—it was not agreeable to him to part with it, especially for concerns with which he was not conversant, and to a man of whose business habits he had formed but a poor opinion. He was not pleased with Mark, he did not like the business, but he *did* like and respect Maria very much; and he, a bachelor, and free from all such ridiculous encumbrances, felt for the curly-headed children.

“Poor little souls,” he said, looking at one soft fat thing asleep in a big basket near the parlour fire, “it would come harder upon them and you, Maria, than I should like to see; Mark

could rough it—a little less comfort would not do him any harm. I am not going to find fault with you, but have you ever heard of such a thing as spoiling people by kindness? I think you spoil Mark—just a little.”

She smiled; perhaps she thought so too, but it never was her way to say hard words of Mark.

Charles Barton lent his brother the money he required, and set matters straight for him, recommending him and his affairs to Maria's utmost care and supervision. The storm passed away from the Warrens, and the old life returned. Something of Mark's difficulties had got wind, however, and he found that he scarcely stood so well in people's favour and credit as he had done. Some acquaintances had dropped him—not unkindly, no one was ever unkind to Mark, but he understood his place with them was lost. Maria knew nothing of this; occupied heart and hand with her children, her household, her needlework, her books—and Mark—she gave the outside world the go-by, and it did not occur to her that it was as much they as she who made the change.

At first Mark heeded the change very little, and smiled to himself, thinking it would pass by, or that he could afford to disregard it, but gradually it troubled and annoyed him. He fretted under the feeling that he was observed, watched; he grew angry, and gave hasty replies, adding to the doubtful opinions; then he became morose and defiant—thus confirming suspicions into facts. He was not strong enough to take his own way and keep it, through good and ill report, or to meet with an open challenge the assailants of his fame, and, by some well-chosen, politic words of jest, or honest explanation, free himself altogether; and the debt to his brother hung like a stone about his neck. He brought home something of his changed moods, was cross, silent, morose, violent by turns; and Maria thought him ill—treated him with her usual gentleness, and exerted herself to be more than usually cheerful, but he rarely vented any of his evil humours upon her.

His affairs partook of his mental fluctuations; he would not meet this man, he slighted that one, he kept his farm-servants in a state of fright and impending rebellion by his violence and in-

justice; and when he grew at last morose and defiant, he became neglectful. If the general feeling was against him, why not justify it? Things might go as they would; all his courage was gone. Then he wandered about with his dogs at his heels, returning late in the evening—not drunk, but often stupid. He had tried the weak man's resource for deadening reflection, and had sat many a day in some small inn alone, and at a distance from home, drinking slowly. At night he would come back more silent than ever, and in the morning he rose depressed and weary, not ashamed, but defiant, to begin another idle, helpless, hopeless day, and end it as before. Maria was terrified. Mark kissed her as of old, and would stroke her head with a word of affection; sometimes he began to speak of other things, but would break off into low murmurings; when she expostulated with him, he would smile and say, "Too late, old girl. Never mind."

She dreaded to appeal to her friends; her brother was in Ireland with his regiment, her mother was getting old—no mere acquaintances would have any influence with him now. She

found time one day to go into Riverford, to see Charles Barton, and entreated him to interfere to save her husband.

"I might do something with him," she said, "if he would speak, or even listen to me, but he puts me aside with a smile. Has he lost his reason?"

"Pretty nearly, I should think. Don't fancy though, Maria, that I have looked on in silence. I have appealed to him more than once. He told me first the weight of his debt to me was crushing him, and he should never pay it off; then he gave frivolous reasons; then he was angry; now he waves me off, and is silent. I have not been down to see you for a long time."

"Have you not? I observe nothing but him, I think, and everything is so wretched that an additional sorrow is not much felt."

"No, I could not come; I dreaded to see your once happy home all clouded. I could not have endured to see him harsh to you."

"He never is," she interrupted eagerly.

"But I have seen him accidentally, have sought him, and told him frankly that evil is

before him, and ruin. He stares, and turns upon his heel contemptuously. What more can I do? The end must come, and when the evil possession under which he is labouring is over, I may interfere to some purpose; hardly now, I fear—hardly now.”

“Poor Mark!” she said softly; “he will come out of this, you will see. I hope so—I pray so.”

“Yes,—but how?” he asked impetuously; “ruined again, and not to be righted. I cannot find so many thousands twice over; and what are you and the children to do?”

“I don’t know—but we shall do very well if only he comes out of what I fear you rightly call this evil possession. Is there such possession, I wonder?—he is so unlike himself—he is not himself. *He* never was or could be wicked; he is only—weak.”

The word fell from her lips softly, almost in a whisper—she had never been so far disloyal to him, even in her thoughts, before, and now she felt as if she had been guilty of a sort of *lèse majesté* by this utterance.

“Weak, indeed!” echoed Charles Barton

through his closed teeth ; then, in his usual voice he added, laying a friendly hand upon her shoulder, "Try to bear up ; I will help you with my last' shilling—you know I will try to do what is best for you. You will believe that, won't you ? Have a glass of wine, my dear, and then we will go out into the High Street, and get something or other for the youngsters from Uncle Charles."

She shook her head sorrowfully ; she could not think of toys and cakes just then, but he walked with her some distance along the road to the Warrens, and as they went down the street he filled her pockets with one trifle after another, she too absorbed in her thoughts to pay any heed to him.

Long afterwards, speaking of the sorrow of that time, she suddenly remembered his gifts, and said, as if it had been yesterday,

"Oh ! Charles, I quite forgot to thank you, too, for the children's toys."

The descent was gradual, but it was certain ; the farm was neglected, the horses sold, Mrs. Barton kept her children as respectable as she could ; no word of complaint crossed her lips,

but she was pale and thin ; people remarked how aged she looked, when she went into the church ; she was rarely seen elsewhere. Then came debts and duns. There was some difficulty about the children's schooling, and Mrs. Barton sold her trinkets to pay for that.

Mrs. Fielding helped her daughter as far as she was able ; one or two of Mrs. Barton's girl friends came forward generously enough, but the bitter cup stood ready mixed, and the Bartons drank it to the dregs. The tension of mind and body gave way at last—Mark lay ill with low fever, and then he came to himself. Fortunately for him, no one had lowered him in his own eyes—the most terrible of all shame, that which appears in the faces of one's nearest and dearest had not fallen upon him ; his penitence was not abject. He sought his place of repentance earnestly and with tears, and found it ; but the man was shaken body and soul, the gay and gallant bearing was gone, he had grown morally timid, no longer self-dependent, but yielding his opinion to that of others, and silent and retiring. Things might have gone worse with him, and the fallen man might have become

crushed, had it not been for Maria's tender love and devotion. By no word or look had she varied towards him—he was now and always her Mark; her eyes rested upon him, her smile met him with all its old trust, not in his judgment or worldly prudence, but in himself. He took home the healing balm of her unwavering affection, and it saved his self-respect, and in the end he was made whole.

Such holy charity may save a man's soul alive, but his worldly position must depend upon his clever use of the mammon of unrighteousness. Mark Barton had been very unwise in his generation, and made a poor use of his unrighteous mammon, so the world passed him by. There may be a certain amount of envy, detraction and unforgiveness felt towards the very successful, into whose lap all fortune's favours seem to be showered, but the unsuccessful finds no place. The ruck pass on, unheeding him who falls in the race—no one in his haste can stop to give help.

It was all over with Mark Barton's early dreams of a bright home at the Warrens. He put himself into his brother's hands, and followed

his advice, not expressing any dissentient feeling to his arrangements. The Warrens was let for a term of years, with the farm land—all superfluities were sold to meet the debts—Charles Barton and Durrant Fielding both contributed some money, to free their brother and sister once more, and enable them to keep their children at school; and the useful household gear was selected and put into a small cottage, which Charles Barton hired from Lord Riverford, who had property close to the town which bore his name.

Everything was settled, and the family were free—free, not to live in ease and luxury, but to work, to the best of their ability, probably for the whole of their lives, and to begin to practise self-denial. It sounds a small and not a difficult task, but it was one that would engage every day.

The Warrens was let, and not sold. Mark lifted up his head sadly, and said,

“You will not sell it? Why? It would be best.”

“Ah! no, Mark,” his brother answered, “there is Ned. We must hope for him, and give him

his chance of living there. Besides," patting him on the shoulder, "who knows, you may return there yet yourself."

Mark shook his head sadly.

"Not I," he said, "not I."

The cottage they had hired stood in a tolerable garden, and some shrubs concealed it from the road; the porch was overgrown with clematis and climbing roses; there was a small brick-floored hall, or rather passage, with a room on either side, and a kitchen behind, with outhouses, and, flanking all, a pretty, natural-grown oak wood. It was pretty and modest, very small; still it was possible to be content there, ay, and to be happy.

Mark looked into Maria's face when they took possession, as if to find his sentence there. His look was a timid one. This was not the home he had meant for her, not the one she deserved. Should he find tears on her cheek, or a look of disappointment or regret? Her eyes were brighter, her cheeks less pale, than they had been for some time past, and her lips parted in a smile. She was content, and Mark took courage, but he said no word. She indeed

thanked her brothers in her quiet tones, and but few sentences, for all that they had done to help them; her voice shook a little, and tears were in her eyes, but they did not fall; for Mark's sake she must not show all she acutely felt, lest he should take it to heart, and be ashamed.

Charles Barton was very anxious to get his brother some occupation; rather a difficult matter for a man who had studied nothing but crops and stock. Maria still had her little income of sixty pounds a year, but they could not support their family upon that, if they had the slightest intention of keeping the children at school, and trying to retain any sort of gentleness for them. Mark was not fit for the Brewery; he could hardly go in as a supernumerary, or like a boy at the very bottom of the scale. Nothing presented itself.

Lord Riverford was abroad when the Bartons hired Wood Cottage from his steward; and on his return, going over the estate returns, he came upon the entry, and the papers relating to the agreement.

"God bless me!" he said, "Mark Barton

come to grief? He is a good fellow. What is he doing? I'm sorry for him."

"He is doing nothing at present, my lord. Mr. Charles Barton is on the look out for something. Mr. Barton won't get over it very quickly. He was seriously in debt, and got nervous, and drank, they say, more than was good for him. It was a bad business."

"I'm very sorry for him, very sorry. I must think of something for him, I shall be down in East Anglia before long. Lady Riverford shall go and see them."

Finding that his lordship was interested, the steward thought it worth his while to be interested too, so when, a week afterwards, Lord Riverford went into East Anglia for a short stay at the Hall, Mr. Johnson suggested that, if his lordship were still minded to consider Mr. Barton's need of employment, he might offer him the appointment of steward, or bailiff, of his estates lying near the town of Riverford. His lordship had often said he wanted a better man there than mere gamekeepers or farm bailiffs. It was not very lucrative, but Mr. Barton might be glad to take it, and——

"The very thing—capital!" interrupted Lord Riverford. "I can but offer it him; he will do me justice, I know. I am greatly obliged to you, Johnson."

The appointment was offered to Mark Barton, and very gratefully accepted. Here was a sure livelihood, which, with strict care and economy, would enable him to keep his family. None of the children were old enough, or so placed as to understand at once the full meaning of what had befallen them. The elder girls were gentle, loving creatures, with good health and spirits, hard at work at school. Ned, the third child, was more occupied with football, which he did like, and Latin grammar, which he did not like, than with any other sublunary considerations. He was nineteen when he asked his mother the momentous question, "What on earth did you marry my father for?"

The change came to the girls in the form of duties. Life opened at once before them with responsibilities and cares. Julia, in France, began to give her services as English governess, and music mistress to the younger pupils, in exchange for the remaining lessons she

required to complete her own education; and Maria, at Altcaster, did much the same. When they came home for a holiday, they saw the patience of their mother's life, and ruled themselves after her example. Julia then entered a Hertfordshire family, where she was happy and appreciated; and Maria, who had inherited her mother's beauty, married a young surgeon, who took her to his new home and practice, near London. Two younger girls were placed at school; but Ellen, the fourth child, and Mark, the seventh, were laid in an early grave, victims to scarlet fever. When he was sixteen, Edmund left school, and his uncle Charles took him into the Brewery; but Ned did not like the high office-stool and ledgers. He had complained to his mother of having received no better education than that of a charity boy. Poor Ned! A charity boy's education is a very good one now-a-days, if only the boy has the capacity to make the most of it. Certainly Ned's school was not a first-class one, but his want of improvement was rather the consequence of his own idleness. Ned had his father's easy temper and kind heart; he dearly liked to do anyone a

good turn; and he very much disliked being alone, which is an unfortunate thing for one who cannot command the best society, as it infallibly throws him upon the companionship of such as would take advantage of his good nature.

The girls lived and associated with ladies, and made the best of their lives. Lady Riverford spoke of them and their mother as being the most lady-like women who came into the country town. She knew they had undergone great privations—she had seen Mrs. Barton in old shoes and a worn gown, when she had called unexpectedly at Wood Cottage, and the thought of it brought tears to her eyes when she put on a dark blue velvet dress and point-lace lappets for her hair, the same evening, to dine alone with her husband. She knew that the Bartons had more than once not even food in the house. “Improvvidence, or mismanagement, or extravagance,” other people said, but she smiled,

“Improvvidence! extravagance! Why, I have put as much as their year’s income into one dress and its trimmings; what right have I to

talk of extravagance? *I* am always extravagant; the wonder is how *they* look so nice and trim upon their nothing. I blush when I think of it all. I am afraid I should be not only extravagant, but discontented. Don't let *us* find fault."

But Ned was discontented. He looked about him, and saw others with horses, dogs, money, better dressed, better fed than himself, with handsomer houses than Wood Cottage; and he compared these things, in a restless, unreasonable, undiscerning way, and thought the lot had been unfairly dealt to him. Had not his temper and disposition been so suave, so good, he would not merely have been uneasy and unhappy himself, but he would have made all about him so too. He liked to give others pleasure, and he dearly liked to be beloved.

The Bartons' life was a lowly one indeed, and passed on unheeded in the flow of the general current of human lives; but the individuals concerned in it were capable of as much suffering, and of as much endurance and heroism, as those in a loftier station. At nineteen, lofty ways are attractive, and at nineteen one sometimes

believes in the power of overcoming great obstacles, though little ones are too persistent, and too insignificant, to be laid low. At nineteen one is apt to expect the cup of joy and the garland of happiness to be presented to one, not having yet fathomed the mystery of the truth, that the happiness of each man's life comes from within.

CHAPTER IV.

“COULD you go with me to Riverford on Saturday, Ned? It is your half holiday—I do not think your uncle will object to your taking the whole day, for my sake; it is too far for me to go alone and carry parcels. I have some shopping to do, and I thought of calling on Miss Blount; I have not seen her for some time. If I am very fortunate she may be inclined to drive me home.”

Mrs. Barton spoke with a little smile on her lips, but, if truth was told, she was not fond of asking or taking favours from Miss Blount, whom she had known all her life, or from any one else. But she thought with a sigh of the weary, dirty eight miles walk between Wood Cottage and the town; and she who worked

hard, and was running up and down all day, could not help the natural shrinking of the flesh from extra fatigue.

Mrs. Barton had had horses at her own command, and once needed not to ask a favour from anyone. Poverty grieved her very little; so Mark was happy and his children were well, the luxuries of life did not dazzle her. But Ned frowned, and thought, with a boy's longing, of the pleasure it would have been to drive his still handsome mother into the town; and besides, he did not like Miss Blount, and was vexed that his mother should accept her kindness or favours.

Mrs. Barton saw her son's frown, and interpreting rightly one half of its cause, she said,

"Whilst I go to see Hannah Blount, you can go down to the Brewery, Ned. I will call for you afterwards at the office. I do not want to bore you, my boy, with my old friend's particular ways. You will like to escort me, however?"

"Mother! how can you ask?" he said reproachfully; and he contrasted in thought his mother's patient acquiescence in her circumstances, and the rebellion that he felt against them. His heart was the hotter for its unex-

pressed feelings, but Ned did not know how to express them, nor did he perceive any means in his power of altering the causes of them. He was uncomfortable and dissatisfied with many things, and with himself, but in a blind sort of way, and with no understanding. He was, however, not always miserable—on the contrary, with the strange contradictions that occur in human beings, he was of a happy, cheerful disposition, was pleased with little things, liked fresh air and sunshine, and took a boy's pleasure in skating by moonlight, and in tramping through the underwood and turnips after rabbit or partridge.

A strong north-west wind had dried the lanes, and Mrs. Barton prepared for her long walk into Riverford, on Saturday, with greater pleasure than she had expected. Ned had secured his holiday, and taking his mother's cloak and basket, and a thick hazel stick which he had cut in the woods, and which was his unfailing companion, mother and son set out for the town.

The Winter had been long and dreary, in spite of the Christmas holiday, that had united

all the family at Wood Cottage, and in spite of the affection and harmony that reigned amongst them. The cold had been severe, prices were high, and much self-denial and some close packing was necessary to make the re-union of parents and children possible. They were all the better for it, however, now that they were parted once more. There were pleasant words and smiles to recall, and hours that, should they never meet again, would remain embalmed in memory.

Mrs. Barton had been very anxious during the Winter both for her husband and her son ; not that she actually *knew* anything against either of them—it was the instinct, the intuition of wife and mother that made her *feel* they were both exposed to some besetting and dangerous attraction. Edmund came home at reasonable hours, Gilbert Drake's name was not mentioned, and she heard no more of billiards ; but the lad started and coloured, and his breath would come fast, at some chance expression, some hasty foot. She waited till she could obtain the clue to her son's actions, which would enable her, to a certain extent, to direct his way.

After Mark Barton's trouble his wife had associated herself as much as possible with all his occupations ; she had walked and fished with him, had carried his early dinner to him when he was in the coverts, and had kept him, by her presence and her care, from even thinking of the stupefying vice to which he had so nearly fallen a victim ; but in the last hot Summer she had not been as well and strong as usual, and to be his companion she had perforce neglected many things at home ; she had, too, grown to believe Mark was quite to be trusted, and she remained at home to knit up many frayed-out stitches of household duties. Poor Mark ! Lord Riverford first re-opened the door of temptation by taking Mark to the Hall, after a hard morning's shooting, to a bachelor luncheon, where he once more drank the finer wines to which he had been accustomed in earlier days, and which he loved. Some rich guest of Lord Riverford's filled Mark's flask on several occasions ; to more than one tired keeper or beater did he offer a kindly glass himself. The fancy of turning into the warm snug bar of a little inn sprang up, and when the Winter came in cold and dreary, and there were

hardships and annoyances at home, the habit increased rapidly. Mark did not drink hard, but more than was necessary, more than was desirable for his limited means. He strove against the inclination—he knew that Maria's watchful eyes were on him, he felt that he was robbing her and the children. Sometimes he looked a little askance, as if dreading the interference of this silent witness, but he hoped having the children at home might make her overlook him; and he promised himself and her that in the Spring, when he would not so often require a good strong warming-glass, he would break through the habit, of which, to tell the truth, he was half ashamed.

Instinctively Maria understood it; she only silently resolved that, as he was unable to protect himself, she must find strength for both. And he did not hate her for the superior courage she possessed. Could Edmund have seen and understood the workings of his father's and mother's heart, he would not have needed to ask the question, "Why did you marry my father?" One can see but a certain distance, and even then one does not always understand. With what

long-suffering, with what diffidence, should one form a conclusion about others.

Winter was over, heavy rains had washed away the last patches of snow, and freed each little brooklet from its icy chains; the primroses were peeping in sheltered corners from under the heaped brown leaves of oak and fern, and the catkins swayed on the hazel boughs. The pathway across the fields, and through Lord Riverford's park, was a shorter route to the town than the high road, but had been almost impassable to all but such young active legs as Ned's, and he floundered, or ran along it, to the corner of the road where his uncle passed each morning in his dog-cart, on his way to the Brewery, and where he would rein in his horse, and whoop and whistle to the lad, and drive him the last few miles. To-day the short field path was clean and pleasant, there was a sweet smell of growth in the air, a few lambs were bleating in the meadows, and the rooks, so burnished in the sunshine, circled cawing over-head, or stalked about, busily investigating the brown furrows.

Ned seemed happy with the season; whatever might have disturbed him in the Winter appear-

ed to have been shaken from him. He whistled and chatted as he went along, as free and careless as the birds.

Many a head turned to look at the handsome mother and son, and many a kindly greeting did they meet in the town; for Mrs. Barton, though rarely away from home now, had been very well known there, and the misfortunes she had encountered only increased the respect felt for and shewn to her. She ordered various purchases to be sent to the grocer's, whose shop she entered last. Mr. Smart's father and grandfather had served tea and sugar in the same shop, and in much the same fashion; he was himself thinking of making some alterations—of having plate-glass windows, and adding to the articles he sold. He knew everyone, and the affairs of all; for besides being a great talker, he was a good listener and a keen observer; if his fellow-townfolk had been wise (people very seldom are wise), they might have traced many a rumour, report, and true story to Mr. Smart's counter.

Mrs. Barton ordered her groceries, and asked to have them, and her other parcels, kept until she should call again; "for," she said, "I am

going to see Miss Blount, and she may drive me part of my way home."

Mr. Smart bowed and smiled, for Miss Blount was rich, and an extremely good customer, and between the tasting of some cheese, and the comparison of two kinds of brown sugar, by Mrs. Barton, he paid Miss Blount some mild compliments, and referred to the long acquaintance that he knew to have existed between her and Mrs. Barton.

"And that reminds me," he continued, "you were also a friend of the other Miss Blount, Mrs. Lester that is now. Miss Lester is staying with her aunt just now; but perhaps you may have seen her? No? Well, then, ma'am, I must say a sweeter, more beautiful young lady I never saw. Patty, my dear," to his daughter, who came in all smiles and ringlets, "were we not agreeing last night that Miss Rose Lester is a beautiful young lady?"

"Oh! yes, pa, that she is. Oh, Mrs. Barton, she's that elegant! Oh! you don't know—so genteel!"

Ned had been standing lounging against the door, paying no heed to what went on within,

but watching the passers-by. When his mother joined him he walked on with her to Miss Blount's house, intending to meet her again in the town, but as he turned the handle of the gate he saw standing in the large bay window the figure of a young girl, an unusual sight in Miss Blount's house. The girl turned quickly away, spoke to some one in the room, and in another minute the hall door was thrown open, and she came springing down the path, with outstretched hands. "Mamma's friend, Mrs. Barton! Auntie said you were Mrs. Barton. I could not let the servant come."

Mrs. Barton kissed her, and holding her hand, turned to her son.

"Edmund, this is Rose Lester, my great friend's child."

The girl's disengaged hand lay for a moment in Ned's grasp, and then he followed his mother into the house, without very well knowing why.

Miss Blount greeted her visitors in a distant, stately way; she wanted nothing in real kindness and generosity, but something perhaps in courtesy and manner. Although they called each other by their Christian names, one would hardly

have supposed that Miss Blount and Mrs. Barton had been acquainted all their lives, or that the bright fluttering creature at Mrs. Barton's knee was the daughter of Miss Blount's only sister, unless it were that her aunt's eyes followed Rose's every movement, her ears listened to every word.

The grave old parlour-maid brought cake and wine into the room, and placed the tray upon the table; it was the custom in that house to offer refreshments to every guest, no matter what their position, or what their errand. Rose did the honours for her aunt.

"I have the great pleasure, you see, of a visit from Rose," Miss Blount said; "she has not been here since she was a little girl. You would not have known her again, of course?"

"I hardly know. I fancy she is like her mother."

"Oh! not much—not at all, I should say," answered Miss Blount, almost contemptuously; for, though she loved and delighted in Rose, she had a passion for her only sister, Mrs. Lester, and could not allow that anyone resembled her.

"Rose, dear, take Mr. Edmund into the garden, and see if there are any violets under the wall yet; it is so dull for a young man in the house. I shall take Mrs. Barton home presently, so do not stay out long."

Miss Blount went to the garden door with her niece; made her a little joking speech, and returned to talk over with her old friend those things that make up country, and especially country-town life, gossip, charities, servants, churches, curates.

Hannah Blount was the elder daughter of a man who, born in Yorkshire, of decent parents, educated at a common school, was endowed by nature with certain individual gifts, and held others from his race. The frank, generous, manly temper, the indomitable will, the cheerful courage and endurance, were as peculiar to him and his Scandinavian, or earlier ancestors—that old race which ethnologists say was never conquered, the Brigendi—as the curling chestnut hair and dark eyes, the rich complexion, and the tall stalwart figure, that seemed incapable of fatigue.

It is difficult to say where individual gifts

begin and those of inheritance end ; it is sufficient here to admit them both. No member of his family had emerged before him from their obscurity. His mother was an honest, pious woman, who set the fear of God as the rule of life before herself and her children, and who bowed, in the stern silence of resignation, to the blow that robbed her of her husband and children, smitten down by fever, all save one, John.

She was a hard, sensible, working woman, of the labouring classes, but she had taken pains with herself, in the long Winter evenings of the north. She read, and could write a letter, and make extracts from books that pleased her. John worked hard at school, and his mother helped him, and took pride in the acquirements of her son. He had some talent for drawing, especially for designs. He drew maps and plans, his estimates of size and distance were accurate. He got some small employment ; improved daily, and became a valuable clerk to a civil engineer in York. Ready, assiduous, untiring, and fortunate in all his undertakings, he was admitted a civil engineer. He settled his old mother in a comfortable house, and visited her

regularly once or twice a year, for he had gone to Altcaster from York. A canal for East Anglia was in contemplation, and Mr. Blount was the engineer employed. In Altcaster he married, and there his two daughters, Hannah and Mary, made the acquaintance of Maria Fielding.

John Blount had opened a wharf on the river near Altcaster, and another at Riverford, on the canal, for the store and sale of grain and timber, and became a wealthy man. Mrs. Blount died, and removing from Altcaster, he built a house at Riverford. There he lived happy and prosperous ; there he died honoured and lamented. An earnest, simple-hearted, cheerful man, he could hardly take rank as a gentleman, but he was one of nature's own noblemen. The door of his house was open to rich and poor ; he never turned his face away from any poor man. His daughters did not go to county balls, and he rarely went out to dinner, but if any charitable meetings were on hand, if subscriptions were required, or some energetic measure needed, John Blount was put in the van ; John Blount was called upon to take the chair ; John Blount

had to make his quiet, concise, well-expressed propositions.

When John Blount died, he left his property and possessions to be equally divided between his daughters, with the recommendation to make such amicable arrangements as should preclude legal annoyance, and conduce to each other's comfort and convenience.

The sisters had been deeply attached to each other, and Mary the younger, who had married Mr. Lester, found it convenient to sell her share of house and wharves to her sister, and take her portion of her father's wealth in money only. Hannah loved the house in which she had passed many happy years, and wished to continue her father's business, by means of his old clerks and a manager. Up to the present time she had been very successful, and she liked to have a home to which she could welcome her sister and children.

She bore a curious likeness to her father's picture hanging on the wall. It was an oil painting, of a man between forty and fifty years of age, with bright dark eyes, a smooth calm brow, and cleanly shaven face, a kind expressive

mouth, and hair powdered and tied in a pig-tail; the broad shoulders, too, were represented. One would have staked one's faith upon that man's honour and kindliness, and have guessed him to have been, as he was, six feet and an inch in height, and very powerful.

Hannah Blount was cast in the same mould; she was five feet ten inches tall, and strongly made, with long limbs, and long hands and feet; her hair, once darker than her father's, was now grey, and resembled the powdered head in his picture; the proportions of her features were almost identical with his, the lines about their eyes and eyelids were precisely the same, but his eyes had been brown, and hers were blue, and there was no light in them, the brilliant complexion in him was replaced in her by a dark sallow one, and the sweetness of his mouth was wanting in her; yet she was curiously like him, with that caricatured likeness that is often more striking than the more exact copy in feature and colouring, such as that presented by the small portrait of Mrs. Lester. Lovely Mary Lester had not inherited so full a measure of her father's spirit as plain Hannah Blount had done. The beauty

and sweetness had fallen to the one, the reserve and cool courage to the other ; to both had come perfect honour and justice, the rarest of all gifts in women.

Mary Blount, the younger sister, had been much admired and deeply beloved, and was now the wife of Herbert Lester. Hannah Blount, the elder, had never been attractive, and had never been beloved, though she had had two offers of marriage, of which she never spoke but once, when she told her sister that, flattering as such things might appear to others, she could not be insulted in her common sense through such quasi-tributes to her vanity (of which, by-the-by, she possessed none at all), and she was aware that her fortune was the real attraction. Poor Hannah ! she did not give people credit for discovering her good and sterling qualities, and this often made her short and rude in her manner. The opposite sex never found grace or favour in her eyes ; she could not forgive Herbert Lester for winning her sister's heart, and though she meant to be civil to him, she was shy and awkward in his company, and could not refrain from little cutting, bitter speeches

about men and their follies or wickednesses. He smiled and endured her railing, knowing her excellent heart, but he took care as seldom as possible to annoy her by his presence.

Hannah loved her sister with even greater intensity than before, because of the weakness she had shown in trusting herself to the tender mercies of "an ogre of a man;" and she made it a sacred duty so to live, to act, to spend that Mary and Mary's children should find a harbour of refuge with her at Riverford, in their possible difficulties, or a bower of bliss in holidays, and that when she died she might leave them a handsome portion. One might have supposed sometimes she would have nothing to leave, so lavish was she in her favours and indulgences to this idolised sister and her family, and so bountiful was she in charities to all who asked of her; but she was very unpretending in her own manner of life, desired no personal luxuries, and gave herself no indulgence but her carriage.

She would, occasionally, ask about such or such a one, as to their deserving assistance, but she never acted only on the advice and opinions

of others, but took the trouble to look thoroughly into the circumstances, and judge for herself of the merits of the claimants upon her bounty. Except by the inquiries that she made from time to time, Hannah Blount's unbounded liberality was never hinted at by herself.

Her house bore a silent testimony to character and habits; it was unpretending, but roomy and comfortable, beautifully clean, and served by two old-fashioned maids, and a man-servant who was also coachman. The furniture was good and old-fashioned; in the dining-room were books of all sorts, bought at intervals, to interest herself, her sister, and the children—books that represented all stages of mental development. The sideboard was rarely locked, and on its broad oaken shelf stood salvers and glasses ready for use, a dish or two of fruit that was in season, and a silver box of biscuits—she liked to be able to serve a guest herself at a moment's notice. The bed-rooms were kept aired and ready for any fondly-welcomed member of the Lester family; and the drawing-room, in which she sat now with Mrs. Barton, was hung with pictures, drawings, and engrav-

ings, bought of some struggling artist, or chosen for some chance resemblance to one of the Lester children, or done by the hand of one of those children. Many of these pictures were doubtless bad, or inferior, as works of art, but to her, in her solitary life, they stood in the place of friends, and were fraught with memories. The room was warm and bright, the colours well-chosen; almost every chair was an easy-one, and no two were alike; there were two couches; the tables were covered with pretty objects, except the one writing-table that she kept orderly and sacred to her sole use. There was a pianoforte, which she could not play, but which it was the greatest delight of her life to hear one of the Lesters or some visitor play.

Whilst listening to music, the latent sweetness of Hannah Blount's soul appeared in her eyes, and played about her mouth. In the drawing-room, too, was a large Indian cabinet, which was kept locked, and which the Lester children declared contained all their letters, and themes, and scraps of drawings, and verses from their earliest childhood upwards, treasured by that tender, single-hearted woman; it contained

likewise, all the papers that had belonged to the only three beings Hannah Blount loved—her father, mother, and sister.

It must not be supposed that Miss Blount had never been imposed upon, had never met with ingratitude ; so kind a heart, so open a hand, had been but too surely a mark for much transgressing ; she had suffered acutely, and had been many times bitterly disappointed, but she did not swerve from the path she had marked out for herself, and to no one but her sister had she ever confessed her mortifications. She carried her head with just the same dignity, and her face wore the same quiet gravity ; she would rather have relieved ten impudent, undeserving beggars than have by chance turned away a real case of distress.

Of course she was thought “odd” and “Quixotic ;” of course prudent, stingy people smiled at her want of caution and discernment. She bore it all with infinite meekness. She saw the whole, but she behaved as though she saw not ; she did what she pleased with her own, and she laid up for herself “treasure where neither moth nor rust could corrupt.”

She sits now in her drawing-room, in a deep lounging-chair opposite to her father's picture, and talks to her old friend of the early days in which Maria Fielding had often walked, between the two sisters, Hannah and Mary Blount (two of them beautiful, and all three above the ordinary height of women), down the High Street of Altcaster or Riverford, watched and commented upon by admiring gazers; and then they speak of Rose Lester, and Mrs. Barton asks that she may come and see her, and remarks that, though not so tall, she still resembles her mother.

"She is a dear good girl, my Rose," answers Miss Blount, "but not like her mother—never as pretty as her mother, Maria."

CHAPTER V.

AND what are the two young people saying to each other, in the garden?

Rose was but seventeen, and had the sweet shyness of maidenhood hanging about her, though she did live in London, and had that easy charming manner that comes from being used to mix with other people, and the intuitive perception when one is "dear to some one else." A tall, big young man, with the deepest of blue eyes, who blushed when she spoke to him! He was a problem to Rose; what should she do with him? She pulled a handful of violets as her aunt had bidden her, and then she said, with a sudden resolve,

"I suppose you like horses?—let us go and look at Auntie's. Come and see the old pony,

and tell me if he would carry me still. Auntie thinks of buying me another, but I do not see why she should. I shall not be very long here; it may be long before I come again, and then she would have to sell him. James (the groom) wants me to have a new one, but that is natural—his mistress's stable reflects credit upon him; the fuller the stable, the more respectable the groom."

So chatting, she led the way; and they were soon discussing the merits of the present denizens of the stables, and Edmund pleased James by thinking with him that certainly Miss Rose ought to have a new horse.

"You see, sir," said James, leaning affectionately against a big bay's hind leg, "it couldn't matter the least in life to mistress, sir, if she bought another. I'd make no bones about groomin' of him, and if it was that we had for to sell him, why, that would make no great odds neither; he'd go out of this stable a sight better lookin' than he came into it," and the groom winked knowingly at Ned.

Rose and Edmund had become quite confidential now, and as they turned back into the

garden she said, "James is a character—perhaps you know? But his name is Robert; all Auntie's grooms are called James, because my youngest brother's first acquaintance with a groom commenced here; his name was really James, but the child thought that "the James" was equivalent to the groom or the coachman. Aunt Hannah is a conservative in her affections, at any rate, and all her stablemen have been called James."

Then from horses they talked of dogs, and Edmund told of his favourite setter Victor; thence on to books, where Rose found herself far a-head of her companion, but, after the fashion of most true women, she descended in pity to his level, and spoke of some works of travel lately published; he was interested, and could bear his share of talk, and she promised to get her aunt to lend him some books that would please him.

"Is it not strange," she said at last, *àpropos* of nothing, "that your mother and mine should have been friends all their lives, and that their children should never have met before? I have stayed at Riverford, but have never seen you or your sisters, and it is a great many years since I saw your mother."

"But I have seen you before," he said, smiling.

"No! When? I do not remember. I supposed you and your sisters must have been at school when I was here."

"Do you not remember ever going to Altcaster? I was once staying there with my grandmother Fielding, and you came to see us, to play in the garden, and we had tea under the trees, and you——"

"I ate all the cake, I am sure, or spilled the cream, for I was a pickle, and Auntie spoiled me dreadfully."

"No, you did not, but you were stung by a wasp under the mulberry tree."

"Oh! I remember—I remember. There were quantities of cabbage-roses in that garden, and bees in long rows of hives under a wall, and apricots on the wall; and there was an old lady in a black gown, which was looped up at the sides, and showed a quilted silk petticoat and black silk stockings, and buckles on her shoes; and she wore a curious white net cap, with long net strings fastened behind and hanging down her back. What a long time ago it was!" Rose walked on musing; and then, looking up sud-

denly she said, "You had a sister Julia—Julia; her hair was lighter than mine, and curled; she was pretty. I remember I liked her. I should like to see Julia."

Edmund laughed outright—the girl spoke so like a child.

"Yes, I have a sister Julia—a little older than I am, and the old lady you recollect was my grandmother—she has been dead a few years. We met a very long time ago. I think you must have been six years old."

"How very funny!" she said; "but I want to see Julia. I like that name so much."

"And your name," he said—"I fancy it was Mary, like your mother's; and yet there was something else that they used to call you—I cannot recollect what."

"Oh! they call me 'Wild Thyme' still at home, and sometimes 'Sweet Marjoram,' because my name is Rose Mary—one herb and another. But it was wise of my sponsors to call me Mary as well as Rose, that they might have a quiet and respectable name for me, in case I should have grown up awkward and ugly——"

She stopped short and coloured violently.

What a wonderful blunder she had made!
How ashamed she felt!

"I beg your pardon," she said softly, and with dignity.

"For what?" he asked, surprised.

He spoke in perfect good faith—he had not observed that there was anything unusual in her mode of expression—it seemed to him just enough. Then she laughed, and returning to the house she waved him to go into the drawing-room, and fled away upstairs to recover from her stupidity.

By-and-by she heard the roll of the carriage and the pawing of the horses under her window, and then the maid came to bid her prepare to go with her aunt, who intended to drive Mrs. Barton back to High Beeches.

The two ladies had already got into the phaeton, and Ned handed Rose to her seat, and then he sprang on to the box, and they drove into the town to call for Mrs. Barton's parcels. As they came down the High Street, James turned round and touched his hat.

"If you please, ma'am," he said to his mistress, "you was saying this morning you'd like

to speak to Mr. Drake; there he be now, just going up to his house."

"Quite right, James ; I will speak to him."

Gilbert Drake, a veterinary surgeon, and a dealer in horses, was entering his house door, which was held open by a young girl, when the carriage drew up suddenly close to him, and he turned round to see who it might be. The girl gave one quick, timid look, dropped a little curtsey to the ladies ; and then, seeing Ned, she coloured, gave an indescribable smile of recognition, and disappeared.

"What a pretty creature!" said Rose, in a half whisper to Ned, who sat on the box above her ; he nodded, but did not venture to turn towards her a face all aglow with blushes.

Meantime, Mr. Drake, having bowed in his grandest fashion to the ladies, advanced to the carriage, and leaning on the door with one foot on the step, he listened to Miss Blount's repeated charge that the horse she had commissioned him to look out for her niece should be perfectly broken and good-tempered.

"I have a little grey horse that I will send up for you to look at to-morrow. Miss Lester

can mount him if she likes—I think he would be just the very thing,” said Mr. Drake, setting his white hat lower on his eye-brows, and a little more cocked aside ; and presently he added, “ And the brown mare—do you like her ? She makes a very good match for the bay, except the trifle of colour. May I look at her, Miss Blount ? ”

And he went up to the horses, scanned them narrowly, and passed his hand down the mare’s fore-legs, with the quiet assurance of a man who knows his business, and is sure of his ground.

“ She’s looking very well, Miss Blount—the better for her stable, I should say,” and he resettled his hat, and thrust one hand deep into his breeches’ pocket. “ You have no further commands to-day ? Drive on, James.”

With the disengaged hand he bowed so low as almost to touch the ground with his hat, and with a familiar nod to the young man on the box he said,

“ You are in good quarters, Mr. Edmund.”

He stood a minute or two looking after the carriage, and smiled to himself as he mused,

“ A very sweet girl is Miss Lester, and the

grey will carry her splendidly ; I'll answer for it she sits as light as a feather, and has a hand—my ! when a woman has plenty of pluck and a light hand, I think she might ride the devil !” and he slapped his thin but shapely leg, tightly cased in leather breeches and gaiters. Then, as he turned into his house, he added, “ If Master Ned Barton knew what he was about—but of course he doesn't, no more than his father before him. Ha ! ha !” Gilbert Drake passed his hand round his firm square jaw, which, together with his lips, was clean shaven ; the hand was long and thin, almost refined-looking, but its fingers were hard as iron, and its grasp was unrelenting.

Another person, too, watched the carriage drive away. A hand moved aside a blind in an upper window of Drake's house, a pair of dark eyes looked out, and they were sad but proud.

When Edmund Barton found himself at home again, on pretence of smoking a quiet pipe, he took himself off into the wood. He was very silent during the evening, and went early to his room. On Sunday, instead of running about after his mother all day, as was his wont, he whistled the

dogs and went off for a long walk alone, as soon as the early dinner was over. In the evening he returned, looking tired and dispirited, and found his father and mother sitting by a little fire in the parlour. His mother looked at him anxiously for a moment, but his father was in his most genial mood, smoking a cigar that his wife had brought him from Riverford the previous day, and sipping a tumbler of punch that she had brewed.

He began to talk to Ned about his visit at Miss Blount's, and to ask his opinion of Miss Lester.

"Everyone says she is a sweetly-pretty girl, even your mother says so. I have not seen hersince she was a mere scrap. Your mother says she has promised to come over here some day. I want to see her. If you and she were to like each other now——"

"Like each other!" echoed Ned. "What could Miss Lester possibly like in me—a great awkward boy! She is clever and beautiful, and rich—and rich," he repeated, as if there lay some magic in the word.

"All the better for you. Upon my word, I don't see any such mighty reasons for her *not* liking you. You are a good-looking fellow; you can

ride and dance well, and if you stick to the Brewery, I really cannot see so much difference between you. Why, lad, her grandfather, who built that house, was only a labourer's son, I believe."

"Yes," said Ned, stretching out and contemplating his long, powerful arm, "but the granddaughter is as much a lady as Lady Riverford, and, if I am not mistaken, she knows quite as much. Don't chaff me about her. She is very pretty, but she can never be anything to me. What on earth could I offer her?"

"A kind and loving heart," said his mother. "I do not say that she will ever desire it, but the impossibility is not so great as you would make it out. If you do well, and your uncle makes you a partner in the Brewery——"

"Don't, mother," the young man said, with a contracted brow. "Don't make me feel more awkward in her company than I am. I tell you she will never care for me. I know it cannot be!"

"Good heavens!" cried Mark Barton, emitting a great puff of smoke, after Ned had left the room, "what rodomontade has the boy got in his head? Herbert Lester, the briefless

barrister, did not find Mary Blount's wealth in his way at all. Why should our Ned be squeamish? However, it was a stupid subject to broach, and my fault, as usual. Best let him be. Yet I own I should like to know what all these insuperable objections of his are. I could almost fancy he had some crotchet or other, and that it was not mere words."

He spoke as if he wanted an answer, but Mrs. Barton had none to give.

Miss Blount bought the grey horse for Rose, and the girl rode him, and looked well upon him, as Gilbert Drake had supposed she would. She went over to Wood Cottage sometimes on horseback, with the groom behind her, and sometimes in the carriage with her aunt. She did not forget the books she had promised to lend Ned, and he returned them singly at the door in the morning, on his way to the office; but he never ventured to go in, or to ask either for Miss Blount or Rose.

Rose always chose Saturday for riding to High Beeches; she was, perhaps, hardly conscious of this, and would certainly have resented it, had anyone said that Edmund Barton was

only at home on Saturday afternoons ; but she did so choose. Fortunately, her associates at Riverford were too few to make any remarks upon her proceedings. Once or twice James, coming into the kitchen in the morning, and interrogated by the maids as to his work for the day, had said, with his head on one side, reflectively—

“Saturday!—well, I s’pose Miss Rose and me ’ll be for Highbeech to-day ; it’s about our day, I’m thinkin’.”

Miss Blount had fallen into some of the habits of a solitary person. When alone, her breakfast was carried upstairs to her, for she wrote most of her letters, and made up her accounts, and gave her orders in her room, before she faced the day, and what it might bring her. But Rose Lester was an early riser, and Miss Blount would come down, when she was there, and breakfast with her in a loose wrapper, and return to her room to finish dressing afterwards. The girl was then free until luncheon ; she read, and played, and strolled out of doors. She found an artist in Riverford at this time, and went two or three

times a week to take lessons in drawing animals, and walked on fine mornings across the fields from her aunt's house into the town, which was about a quarter of a mile distant. Sometimes she returned the same way, sometimes by the street, if she had any little purchase to make.

One morning, soon after she had begun her lessons, she met Ned Barton, and she stopped a moment to speak to him ; after that, she constantly saw him, and he usually only lifted his hat. She did not attempt to interrupt him in what she supposed was the pursuit of his business. Neither of them rendered much account to themselves of what this constant meeting might mean, but on drawing-days they each knew at such an hour they would meet. It was on her return walk that Rose usually met Edmund, but one morning, a hot, breathless day, as she passed through the fields, she saw at some distance from her, under the pollard willows by the river, two figures, a man and woman, and the man, she thought, was Edmund Barton. For some reason, she could not have told why, she walked a little faster, and

resolutely turned her head away. After her lesson, returning home, wondering a little why she had not seen Ned at the usual hour and place, she met, on the footbridge across the stream, a young girl, who walked fast, with the leaf of her hat pulled down to hide her face. In a shy way she lifted her eyes, and Rose saw she had been crying; and after she had passed her, she remembered that she had seen the girl before, holding open the door of Gilbert Drake's house. Rose never saw Edmund Barton in the morning again. The weather was too hot to ride or drive in the afternoon, so Miss Blount and her niece dined early, and Rose drove or rode late in the evening.

Returning one lovely moonlight night from a long ride, Rose saw in the lane leading to the town two persons walking leisurely. The moon threw chequered light and shadow upon them from the hedge-row boughs under which they passed, but in a broad belt of light suddenly were revealed to her the figures she had seen a week before at high noon under the deep shadow of the willows. This time she *knew* the man was Edmund Barton, and the

woman, she fancied—oh! it was only fancy!—but surely it was the little maid at Gilbert Drake's. What should she do? Nothing on earth would make Rose pass those two. She could not endure the idea of spying upon his actions; he must not know she had seen him. What had she to do with him? She would not know—she would not see. Sooner than pass them, she would have turned her horse's head and ridden some miles round another way home—but how account to James for such a vagary?

Inspirations come quickly to such as Rose. They could not have seen her yet, for she had seen them across the boughs of a thick dark hedge. She reined up her horse in the deepest shadow, that she might think a moment—saw that James was still some distance behind her—remembered that at the corner of the lane very near where she stood there was a footpath across the fields—they *might* take that, and she should miss them there; they *must* take that—she so intensely desired it. She deliberately dropped her whip into the grass in the thickest shadow she could find, and then she turned her

horse's head, and rode slowly back to the groom to tell him what she had lost ; the man jumped off his horse and groped along in the dark to the spot where she had dropped the whip. She never spoke a word—her mind was too intent upon the chance ; they could not see her, but they might hear the horses, and be warned to hasten their steps. Just as James cried out that he had found the whip, she saw Ned's tall figure emerge from the shadow of the hedge and cross the stile into the fields, and then he helped his companion over. The coast was clear. Rose's heart beat high as she waited for James to mount and to give them a minute or two more to increase their distance from her ; and then slightly touching the grey's shoulder, and giving him his head, she cantered up the lane at a rate that made James's sides ache to follow. The clatter of the horses' hoofs made Edmund Barton turn round as he crossed the wide field in the open moonlight. He knew the grey horse, he knew the flutter of the habit, the profile sharply cut against the sky, under the black straw hat ; he turned hot and cold, pulled off his broad hat,

and rubbed his hand over his brows, pushing away the thick hair.

"Good Heavens!" he muttered, "it was Rose Lester!"

CHAPTER VI.

SUMMERS are very hot in East Anglia, and thunder-storms frequent and severe. Rose thought it too hot to ride at all, and the stable-boy took the grey horse out early, when the water-carts came their allotted mile out of the town and laid the heavy dust; and Rose watched the pretty creature fretting and bounding under the boy's light weight as he crossed the road and turned up the green lane for his morning canter. She was generally at breakfast on his return, and would jump up from table to carry him a piece of bread as he entered the yard; his great brown eyes would dilate, and he would look his mistress up and down with a sorrowful expression, as if he wondered why she wore that white dress, which did not please his taste

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so well as the dark blue habit, which meant for him fresh air and long hours out in the daylight, stretching along over the breezy commons, crushing the thyme under his hoofs, and scaring the rabbits now and then ; or loitering down cool lanes sweet with honeysuckle and clematis, nibbling a spray of wild rose that tangled across his nose, and coming upon brooklets almost dry, where she would let him stand for a moment to cool his feet, and to dip his nostrils into a pool bordered with forget-me-nots. The grey, like many other horses, keenly admired beautiful scenery, and his organs of locality were strongly developed.

“By-and-by, when it is cooler,” she told him, “we will go out again ; meantime be patient, and don’t fret too much in the stable ; you have got a loose box, which is more than your fellows have.”

Rose gave up her drawing-lessons, “for the present ;” she found the walk too fatiguing in the hot weather, so she sat and read in the garden, and drove out late with her aunt.

Miss Blount’s garden was a pleasant place, though so near the town ; it held a perfect

wealth of wall-fruit and strawberries—the air was laden now with the rich perfume of the latter, and by-and-by there would be apricots, peaches, plums—such plums! The standard-roses were gorgeous in bloom, and the flower-beds were ablaze with scarlet geraniums, tastefully planted in long wreaths bordered with silver or golden leaves, and with blue lobelia, that looked as if they had been flung across the soft, deep green lawn. The straight side walks were planted with flowering shrubs, and common but sweet and gay flowers. Rose often said that Auntie's garden held flowers when that of no one else had any, and that you might pull a lapful without their loss being discovered. At the bottom of the garden was a hedge of rhododendrons, which, with a deep sunk fence, was the only division from the fields between it and the town.

From the weeping ash, where Rose usually sat when alone, and from the little Summer-house, built of unbarked logs of fir, where Miss Blount would often lead Summer visitors, out of the hot, closed house, one could see, across the fields, the waving grass, the blue, wandering

stream, fringed by willows, the thick trees of a plantation; and, above all, the tower of Riverford Church, with its four pinnacles, and the spire rising amongst them. The sound of the chiming bells was borne pleasantly across the fields, rising and falling on the breeze with a peculiar tone, as if they had been rung in water; and on quiet evenings one could hear the distant hum and murmur of the town. There was always peace and shadow to be found there—sad eyes might delight themselves in colour, tired ears be refreshed with songs from black-bird and thrush, and when no breath stirred elsewhere, a little fluttering air would tremble out from nooks and corners, under the big trees, one could not tell why or whence.

Rose was very tired in these days; a nameless charm had gone out of the things around her, and she had suffered a deep mortification, the deeper that it was unspoken, and even unacknowledged to herself. Her aunt saw her listless, and was anxious, hovering about her, smoothing her hair as she sat, with bent head, intent upon a book, bringing her, at all imaginable hours, port-wine and cake, cake of such

diversities of complexion and manufacture as only the tender, solicitous heart of a maiden aunt could have devised; and for sheer ruth of Miss Blount's look of disappointment when both were left untouched, Rose made herself very nearly really ill by consuming these luxuries. It was only the weather that tried her, she assured her aunt—only the weather, she ailed nothing.

One day, just as Miss Blount was coming down to breakfast, the postman turned in at the gate, and a thick letter was put into Rose's hand. The handwriting was unknown to her, and the postmark gave her no information; she was utterly unaware that that letter would give the colour to all her after-life. Her aunt entered the room with her loving, cheerful morning greeting, the coffee waited to be poured out, and Rose put the letter into her pocket, with a weary feeling that it would keep till by-and-by.

After breakfast she put on her hat and took her book into the garden, but she could not settle to read; she sat and watched the peacock butterflies floating in the sunshine; she listened

to the shouts of some children at play in the recently-cut fields, and she watched the shadow creep across the dial at the end of the walk. Then she bethought her of her letter, and opened it. Its contents surprised her, and she read it twice before she could thoroughly master its import. It ran thus :—

“London, July, 185—.

“I am impelled, by some feeling I can neither understand nor describe, to write to you. It may be gross selfishness, I daresay people would call it so, because I want you to do me a great service, but I cannot decide for myself if it is selfishness, only you can really know when you have read all I have to say. I have foolishly involved myself in serious difficulties, out of which I see no way of escape. Had I been a rich man’s son, had I anything like a position in the world, I fancy I might get free of my troubles, but there is no such chance for me.

“But you can help me somewhat. Will you do so, Rose Lester? I think you will, for your and my mothers’ sakes. I, without a shilling but what I earned in my uncle’s office, was led into playing billiards with richer, cleverer men

than myself; I lost money constantly; I won just enough sometimes to urge me on to play again; I borrowed money; I have had to repay it. It has been hard, up-hill work; it has kept me poor, and made me miserable. I have paid every shilling I owe for clothes, and such things, and there is but one man to whom I am indebted. I owe Gilbert Drake fifty pounds. You may smile at so small a sum; it is large to me, and I cannot meet it. My father cannot help me—my uncle would not. Drake first led me on to play, he offered to lend me money; he is a bad friend for a lad like me. Lately he has worried me for this money, and talked about interest, about lawyer's fees; he has a dislike to me, and he has me in his power, and I feel he will hurt me if he can. I cannot be sure of this, but I have lately thought that Drake was setting a trap for me, and would have been delighted to see me caught in it.

“You may say, you who cannot even conceive of wrong, ‘Brave the man, and let him do his worst.’ Ay, but that I cannot do. I am in other trouble besides this one of money, of which I shall not speak to you; but the extent

of it I have only realized since I knew you. I cannot face it. I have decided hastily to leave the country. Many people will blame me—call me unkind and cowardly. I cannot help it. I see no other way to free myself, and right the wrong of my folly. At nineteen I have thrown up my game here. Is it mad—weak? Weak, yes, because I am poor, and because of you. I could not face you. And I have not money enough to make things straight and right myself. After all, I am not worse than other men; but I dare not excuse myself to you. I would like you not to think it is only weakness that makes me fly; and I would, beyond all words, like that no one could wound my father and mother—they have suffered so much, poor things!—by saying I fled my debts. Will you save them this pain, Rose? Will you prevent Gilbert Drake from sneering against me for ‘a paltry fifty,’ as he calls it? I shall bless you to my dying hour; I shall repay you, if I can. I shall never see you again, but I shall not forget you. I have no right to say it, but think as kindly of me as you can. You have made a great difference in my life—I do not know if

you can understand that. If you decide to grant my wild request, let it be soon. I cannot even think how you will manage it—I am too heart-broken to do more than pray you thus.

“I wrote to my poor mother yesterday—she may be on her way to me as I write. Before you can reply to this, I shall have left England. Would you despise me if I said I was enduring both shame and remorse? Let me make the confession to you—there may be healing in it. I am but a boy—nineteen; and I drop out of the little world that knew me, cut myself adrift from those who loved me for ever. God bless you!

“E. F. B.”

The tears dropped slowly one by one as Rose read that letter, though she was hardly conscious of them. The words were so full of sorrow, that her heart ached for the young man, the son of her mother's earliest friend. “Poor Ned!” she said aloud. And then she thought, “Could nothing save him? Would he keep firm to his determination of leaving the country? Could no one intercede for him? Could no one

bring him back? It must be madness to go like this! His misfortunes will be construed into crimes. No one will find excuses for him. Oh! I wish he had not gone—every one will say he was a coward; and how his mother will suffer! Is there anyone in the world I could speak to?—anyone to whom I could dare tell all this?"

Ah! that was it—she did not *dare* tell it all! What had she to do with it? She might even do him harm by being cognizant of his proceedings; and, besides, he said he had written to his mother—she could not, dared not interfere. She did not understand him. She wondered what it could all mean. Had he married anyone, and was he sorry? She turned the letter over and over in her hands; she read a sentence here and there, but she sat still under the trees, with thoughts that made her heart ache. Poor Ned! how weak, how wicked he must have been! How wicked—nay, how did she know? If he had been wicked, he was suffering shame and remorse now. His punishment had come upon him soon—was it for her or anyone to add aught by hard thoughts to

that punishment? Some people sinned, and in all their lives no one knew—no punishment fell—how was that? And this lad of nineteen banished himself from all he held dear for ever!

But thinking thus would not help him. He had asked her help, and asked it speedily. She sprang to her feet—something must be done. But what?—and how should she proceed? He gave her no directions. She read his letter again. Fifty pounds! How should she find fifty pounds? If she asked anyone but her aunt, they would be surprised at a girl wanting such a sum. How was she to ask this kind, generous aunt, who daily loaded her with favours? Still it must be done, for not for an instant did Rose hesitate in her resolve to help him. He was the son of her mother's friend, she said to herself, and she threw up her head, and looked defiance of every other thought, out of brown eyes, whose dark lashes were still wet with unbidden, unheeded tears.

Having got the money, what should she do with it? He had trusted to her woman's wit

and discretion. And then, as she moved across the grass to go into the house, she saw she had dropped an envelope—it had fallen from his letter, and was addressed to Mr. Gilbert Drake.

As she went to her room, she was laying her plan, considering how this money was to be met and accounted for. Fortune favoured her. Her half-year's allowance, twenty-five pounds, was due, and her mother had not yet sent it to her; one half of the required sum could be covered. She had five pounds still in her purse, and she had a bracelet her brothers had given her; she would dispose of that if necessary, and she thought she might borrow the remainder. She went and knocked at her aunt's bed-room door, and got instant admittance when she announced herself.

Now for a bold stroke; courage and coolness might win her end. Rose's mental stature had vastly increased in the last two hours, and she was nerved by an enthusiasm in another's cause—a generous self-devotion.

"Auntie," she began, "I was going into Riverford, and—well, do you know, mamma has

not sent me my half-year's allowance. Should you object—would you——”

“I suppose the fact is, you want it, my pet? I forget how much it is. Twenty-five pounds! Why, of course you want it. You were talking of a grey silk dress you saw the other day, and, my dear, your drawing-master—you should pay him. I like to pay for everything. Pay, and bring the receipts. Now wait whilst I put on my boots instead of these old slippers, and then I will come down and write you a cheque.”

“And I will take it to the bank and get it cashed,” put in Rose, who was horribly afraid that whoever took the cheque to the bank would have orders to pay Mr. Sepia's account at the same time, for Rose had already paid him.

“You go to the bank to cash a cheque, indeed!” said her aunt, indignantly; “fancy sending my pretty girl amongst those grinning jackanapes of clerks! No, sit down and wait, and James shall bring the notes.”

So Rose got the inkstand, and blotting-pad, and cheque-book, and stood patiently by whilst her aunt wrote, in a very deliberate manner and in her best writing, with the largest of quill-pens,

the long white feather of which she would never cut off, waving over her shoulder, and read aloud as she wrote :

“‘Pay to self or bearer thirty pounds—thirty pounds in figures. Hannah Blount.’ Rather well written, Rosie, I think ; a good signature, and well-crossed *t*. Not a mean little crabbed hand, but broad, clear, and easy to read. By-the-by, Rose,” pursued Miss Blount, touching up the capital H in her name, “how badly your father writes !—not too small, but illegibly.”

Rose did not say a word—she was used to hear her aunt gird at her father ; she knew quite well it was not his handwriting, but himself, that Aunt Hannah could not forgive. Sometimes she would protect him, but she was excited and pre-occupied, so Miss Blount was debarred to-day from the amusement of a little sparring-match with her niece, about Mr. Lester’s merits and demerits.

The cheque was folded, put into a large envelope—Miss Blount scorned small ones—and sealed with John Blount’s old seal—the only one his daughter ever used, and which she carried pendent to her watch-chain—and then

despatched by James to the bank, with many recommendations to promptitude and attention.

In the interval of his absence Rose sat down to the piano, and played some of the airs in which her aunt delighted, partly as a tacit reward for that aunt's kindness, partly as an outlet for her own nervous impatience. She was in the midst of an improvised variation upon "Dunois the Brave," when she heard the iron gate clang, and knew that the man had returned.

"Now, Rose, come here," cried her aunt, when the packet was brought her; "don't go on playing" (poor Rose was only playing because she feared to seem in too great a hurry for the money); "here it is, all right—six five-pound notes—nice crisp new notes. I must say I always think Messrs. Ashley behave handsomely to me; they know I don't like dirty notes—but then, of course, they respected your grandfather. Now, Rose, hold your hands; here are twenty-five pounds for your allowance, and five pounds for your drawing-lessons—do you see?"

"But, auntie——" began Rose; she thought

she must say now that she had paid for them.

"Never mind, my dear. I always meant to give you those lessons, so now get your hat and be off to pay Mr. Sepia ; it is only half-past eleven—you will have plenty of time to go quietly between this and dinner-time. I am going back to my room for a little."

Rose kissed and thanked her aunt warmly, and went out with the precious notes in her pocket. She had been more successful than she had even hoped. Thirty pounds and her own five already—there were but fifteen more to find. She grew hot thinking of what still lay before her. But a little more courage, and all would be settled ; she felt sure she should succeed. She took the road into the town, and then turned short, walked up a narrow lane that led to the wharf, went in at the wide gates, that stood open all day, and rang at the manager's door. He came himself to answer it.

"I saw you coming, Miss Rose, so here I am to meet you. What do you want in the yards this morning ? Have you come for the dogs ?" (for Rose sometimes took them out

with her)—“or does Miss Blount want me?”

“No—I want you myself,” said Rose, feeling the colour tingle to the tips of her ears. “If you are not busy, I want to speak to you—on business.”

He smiled, but led the way into his office, drew a chair forward for her, and waited for her to speak.

“I want fifteen pounds, Mr. Taylor, and I want you to lend them to me. Can you?—will you? Are you very surprised I want this money? I do want it, and I can repay you soon. Don’t speak—of course I shall repay you. Mamma has not sent me my allowance yet; it was due last month, and I want a little money to go on with. You see? You have always been very kind to me since I was quite a little girl, and used to plague you to go with me in the barge; and auntie is so good to me that, if I were to ask her, it would seem” (how could Rose lift such an innocent-seeming face, with such unflinching eyes, to the credulous man before her?—she was indeed grown, and trying the measure of her growth)—“it would seem, don’t you think, rather encroaching upon

her? Would you lend me this for a little while, till I hear from mmmmaa?"

"My dear Miss Rose, I will lend it you with pleasure. Don't say another word. I am very happy to be of any use to you."

The manager was unlocking his large desk, and taking out books and papers. Rose was getting frightened lest he should write her a cheque, and she did not want to complicate her proceedings. But she was relieved by his saying presently as he unlocked the safe.

"Now of course you would prefer the money, and not my cheque. I think I have the notes here. I can give you four five-pound notes, if that will suit you."

"No, no, only the three, and you shall have them again as soon as I hear from home. I am so much obliged to you." She hesitated on the doorstep as she offered him her hand, and looked up at him timidly. "Of course you will not say to Aunt Hannah that I came over to ask you? I am almost ashamed of having been so troublesome."

"Not a word, Miss Rose—business is business." He laughed as he re-locked the safe,

and replaced his books in their usual orderly fashion.

She was glad to get away with her prize, and he watched her lithe figure, and her hair gleaming bright in the sunshine. He had known her all her life, was growing old in the service of her family, and was really pleased to have done a kindness to the young creature, who was a favourite with her aunt's workmen at Riverford, and whom they all looked upon as a Blount, as standing in her mother's stead—whom she really resembled, in spite of her aunt's declaration to the contrary—and they never called her Miss Lester; but always Miss Rose. She turned her head once, and saw the manager still watching her, she waved her hand to him, and passed out of sight.

"I wonder what she has set her little heart upon?" he thought, as he turned back again into the dingy office, that looked the brighter, however, for her recent presence, from the floor of which he picked up a sweet pink rose that she had dropped, and went prowling about, till he found a glass and water, into which he put it, and set it in the middle of the great

desk, to the admiration of all comers during that day. "I wonder what she can have found in Riverford that she wants? Things are good enough for me there, and perhaps for Miss Blount too, but a bird like that would want brighter hangings for its cage than Riverford can boast. Whatever it is, she *wanted* it—there was no mistaking her eyes. Well, she can get it now, poor little woman!"

There is a great deal of poetry and pathos in life, but the manager was not in the least aware that for the last hour he had been highly poetical and pathetic. It might have kept him awake at night, had he suspected it, or he might have thought he was going to have a serious illness, and had better send for the doctor at once.

Rose went her old way by the fields towards the town, and sat down under the shade of the willows, where she could hear the stream murmuring at her feet, and see the beautiful coloured dragon-flies chase each other over the cool green depths. There she read Ned's letter again, there she carefully counted and folded the ten five-pound notes, and put them into the

open envelope he had addressed, and closed it. Then she got up, and walked rapidly into the town, sealed the packet with a plain seal at the stationer's, and went on to Gilbert Drake's house. She saw him standing in the little shop he kept for the sale of horse medicines, with various requirements of horse riders and owners, and she went in at once. She did not blush now, she was rather pale, and her hands were cold as she handed him the sealed packet. Her voice trembled slightly at first, but steadied very soon.

"Mrs. Barton of High Beeches desired me to give you this, Mr. Drake; she is not at home, but wished you to have it to-day, and I took charge of it. She said she would like you to open it, and that I was to ask for the answer."

"I am sorry to detain you, Miss Lester," Drake began in his most courteous tones, and his cold grey eyes were studying the face and figure of the girl, much as he would have studied a thorough-bred filly. "Can I not send Mrs. Barton, or you, an answer?"

"No," she said shortly, "I was to wait for the answer."

"But it is keeping you so long."

"I do not mind waiting—I shall wait."

Rose was at the height of her courage now ; something in this man's outside smoothness, that concealed a hard, unprincipled nature, inspired her with a fearless resolution ; she knew he dared not be actually rude or impertinent to her, but she felt, and with reason, that he would have liked to annoy her.

He set his teeth hard, his square jaw looked more square than ever, and broke the seal, after he had carefully examined both it and the superscription ; and Rose walked to the shop-door, and looked out into the street, that she might avoid being supposed to watch him. She heard him start, but controlled her desire to turn round. Presently he addressed her :

"You are aware of the contents of the packet you brought me, I presume, Miss Lester ?"

"I am not," she answered, coldly and deliberately.

"It is a little matter of business that Mrs. Barton, I suppose, wished to settle with me, and *you* wish to have an answer for her ?"

"Just so. If you please."

"I have, then, received fifty pounds in notes (he counted them one by one before her), and have only to give you a receipt for the money—a receipt to Mrs. Barton for fifty pounds." A little bitter smile played about his lips, and he watched her keenly under his eyebrows.

"A receipt for fifty pounds, to the person that owed them, of course," said Rose coldly, and lifted her brown eyes full and clear upon the man, who was chuckling in his heart.

"She knows all about it, the proud little minx! I wonder what it means? I should like to catch her, only I don't know how. *And I am afraid to try*, said Prudence. There are many persons saved from being criminals by nothing but self-interest, if one did but know it.

He pulled out an old writing-case, and wrote something on a sheet of paper, affixed a receipt stamp, and wrote his name across it, and handed the open paper to her. She turned away.

"I have no desire to look at that receipt. Will you be good enough to enclose it in a sealed envelope. I am sorry to trouble you, but I gave you the packet sealed, and would like to return your answer sealed also."

He sealed and addressed it, and handed it to her once more. She would not yield to the inclination to look whether it was correct, but put it into her pocket at once, bowed gravely, and turned to leave the shop. He had his last shaft ready,

“You said, Miss Lester, that Mrs. Barton was away from home. Can you tell me when she left, and when she will return? and if she has gone with her son, Mr. Edmund?”

The slightest smile crossed her lips.

“My commission with you, Mr. Drake, was to give you a letter and receive an answer. That is completed. Good morning.”

She had beaten him, and he hated her.

When she was alone again in the fields she took out the envelope; it was addressed to Edmund Barton, and the receipt was also made to him. It was all right—all settled. How thankful she was that it was over, and how tired she was, and how glad that her bracelet was still safe in her pocket!

“There is Mr. Sepia’s account receipted, Auntie,” she said; “and I did not get the dress after all. I did not think I liked it so well to-

day. I shall wait till they have some new ones. And now will you take me out to drive this afternoon? Let us go to Great Telford" (where there was a fine old Norman church). "I have never been yet, and I want to see the wooden figures of the knights on their tombs. Will it be too far for the horses? Could we not go to some little inn, and have tea and bread and butter in the garden, and bait the horses? James would not at all object; and you know you like going to the little inns—now don't you? Perhaps they will have some of those pretty baskets you used to get there. I should like to have one for mamma."

That was the telling reason, and prevailed. The carriage was ordered, and Rose leaned back in the soft cushions, at rest, and drinking in the lovely scene through which she passed—blue sky flecked with light wandering clouds, trees all glorious in sun and shade, deep blue distances, and fields of fast-ripening corn, with a soft luminous haze veiling faintly, yet beautifying all.

CHAPTER VII.

GILBERT DRAKE was a wrathful and dangerous man all that day. He was one that did not turn crimson, and become loud and violent when enraged; but he grew white, and his firm lips were more tightly pressed and became livid; his jaw looked squarer than its wont; and all the smouldering hidden fire blazed in his deep set eyes, that seemed actually to emit sparks. A rumour had reached him the previous night that Edmund Barton had left the country, and at the "Lion," in the commercial room, and over the billiard-table, he had made bitter though jesting speeches about the young man. "He was in his black books," he said; "and in other books besides." And then he launched out into strictures upon people that

did not pay their bills, that did not know their position in the world, that were "too big for their shoes," that did not know when they were down, &c., &c., till the whole room knew that poor young Barton had crossed Mr. Drake in some way, and was also deeply in his debt, and even had fled the country.

The lad had crossed Drake certainly, and it was on that account that he had made the most of the debt, for fifty pounds did not matter much to him—he was in easy circumstances. Now, this morning, that the debt was paid, he felt that his excuse for speaking spitefully of the lad was taken from him, and also that he had put himself in the wrong by being in such haste to abuse him. He knew, too, in his own heart, that he would gladly have seen the lad fall into the snare he had laid for him. When he found that Ellen Ward avoided himself, he coolly, craftily, wickedly set his mind to ruin Ned, and the poor girl who loved him, by their own young, foolish hearts, by their very ignorance and simpleness. Drake understood perfectly the emotional, impressionable character of the ill-educated girl, capable, with all its

amiability, of evil, as well as good; and the character of the youth, weak from its very ill-directed strength. He did not see his way to wreak any of his annoyance upon Miss Lester—certainly not without injuring himself; but he laid by his grudge, promising himself to gratify it on the first opportunity; and in the meantime he was a disagreeable and dangerous man at home.

The old woman who had kept house, and cooked for him for many years, knew, when she went into the parlour to lay the cloth for his early dinner, that "Master was in one of his evil tempers, for he sat in the window, reading the paper, very pale, and did not look up." She shook her head, and rocked herself to and fro, and be-pitied herself greatly as she turned the beef-steak pie in the oven, and then poured the soup into the tureen, and carried it into the parlour, knowing it must be done, and she must meet her fate sooner or later.

"Why do *you* bring in the dinner?" he began, with a cool, provoking smile. "You're not fit to come in, your sleeves turned up, and hot with cooking. I went to the expense of having

a pretty parlour-maid, to save myself from seeing your ugly old face. Where is Ellen?—been looking out of window all day, I suppose, and not dressed yet, eh? Twisting her hair this way and that, sticking a pin here, and a bow there, and tying that white apron of hers half a dozen ways.” And he suited his actions to his words, grimacing as he walked to the table. “Oh! I know—tell her to look sharp and come down.”

“Well, sir, Ellen is very poorly to-day, and I told her to go and lie down a bit, and that I’d wait upon you.”

“Mighty considerate of you, certainly, but I don’t choose to be waited on by you—I prefer Ellen. You tell her to come.”

“Lord ha’ mercy!” said the poor woman to herself, when she was safe in the kitchen, “but he’s dreadful to-day. He speaks soft, and looks so perlite, too—that’s always mischief with him. It ain’t that I mind much what he says to me. Of course I knows I am an old woman, but it’s hurting when one’s done one’s best for him for fifteen year, and my cooking hain’t grown old, whatever my face ha’ done. I must call the

girl, any way, and she ain't fit to stand, and what she's took on about is more than I know. Cried herself to sleep last night, and cried herself awake this morning."

Upstairs she went to her fellow-servant's room.

"Here, Ellen, come down, there's a good girl. The master's in one of his tempers, and *will* have you to wait on him. Come down, that's a dear. I'll stand by, and help you, and he'll soon have finished his dinner, and then maybe he'll be going out somewheres—he hasn't been out this morning."

Ellen got off her bed, gave a rapid look at her flushed face and swollen eyes, "tidied" herself a little, and came down, in time to see her master leaving the parlour, in answer to an imperative ring at the shop door.

"Don't you let me catch you out of the way, or *dressing* again," he said, between his closed teeth, to the trembling girl, who crept away into the kitchen, and, dropping into a chair, covered her face with her apron and cried silently.

Gilbert Drake, in the meantime, with calm

features, and a smile of candour on his handsome face, went to meet his customer. He heard with attention and intelligence all that Mr. Ashley, eldest son of the Riverford banker, had to tell him; and finally he got into his dog-cart and went home with the young man to Broadstone, to see the favourite hunter that was ill.

He came home late, let himself into his house with a latch-key, for the servants had gone to bed, and the old housekeeper hoped the evil day had blown over. But whether he had not been treated at Broadstone as well as he expected, or whether he had reserved the ill-temper of the previous day for the helpless heads on which he dared to pour it, matters not; the moment he saw Ellen busy about his breakfast he began—

“Oh! you’re up, are you? Not so smart, either, for all yesterday’s fooling at the glass!” and he gave her a bitter, ironical smile. “Well, I suppose you won’t take so much pains for the future over yourself. That precious young scamp Barton has bolted, I hear.”

The girl stared a moment wide-eyed, then she gasped out, “What?” in a voice between a sob

and a scream, and, hiding her face in her hands, staggered to the door.

"That's it, is it?" said Drake, with a low, light laugh. "He cut away from *you*, maybe. By Heavens! I do believe—" he muttered, as if struck by some sudden thought, glad if his evil wishes had borne fruit.

He made two strides across to where the girl stood, pulled her hands from her face, and turned her round to the light. She was not crying, but a look of despair, and of the agony of indignation that has no vent, was on her face.

"You jade!" he whispered, "I could have kept you comfortable, and provided for you, and that infernal young scoundrel interfered between you and me, and this is what you have got by it. Your fancy man cuts, and leaves you in the lurch. Serves you right. You jade, you!"

His voice got lower and lower, till only she could hear the final words. They need not be written here. Then he held her at arm's length, gave a low, mocking laugh, till the girl wrenched herself from his grasp, and fled away to her own room. He did not know—how

should he?—that her indignation, her wounded pride and decency, were choking her. How could he understand the difference between terrified guilt and despairing innocence? The distinction was too keen and subtle for his coarse observation.

She watched him go out, and then, with a scared, pale, but resolved face, she tied what things she could carry together into a bundle, went downstairs softly, looked for a minute at her old fellow-servant, who was busy washing, with her back turned to her, pinned a little bit of paper on to the coarse apron hanging before the kitchen fire, let herself out of the front door without making any noise, and was gone. The boy in the shop did not hear or see her go, and the old woman, coming an hour afterwards into the kitchen, found the bit of paper, in which was twisted a little pebble brooch, and read,

“You have been very kind to me. Good-bye. It’s best, perhaps, you should know nothing about me. Only don’t believe all they tell you.”

The evening was still and golden; there was not a cloud to be seen, and the sun was going down red behind the Riverford plantations.

The band was playing in the town, and Miss Blount, sitting in the garden with her niece, was listening to the strains, mellowed by the distance. The horses had been so far the day before that the ladies had decided not to drive that afternoon; they had taken their tea in the Summer-house, and Rose was sitting with her arms clasped round her knees on the log step. They had been talking of many things, but at last, as was no uncommon habit, they began to speak of Rose's mother, Mrs. Lester, the idol of Miss Blount's life.

"Auntie," said Rose, "you often promised you would tell me about mamma's marriage, will you now?"

"Ah! Rose, I don't mean anything against your father, poor man, he cannot help it, but she never ought to have married him. My dear, she might have married Lord Riverford; and then there was Mr. Ashley, the banker, I know they both admired her; and they said many things to your grandfather—I know what he thought. Not, my dear, that I should have liked her to have married either of them, or any one else, indeed. No one was good enough for

her. She was so pretty, Rose, so gay and bright, she had a way of speaking like no one else, and she used to turn her head round further than any one I ever saw. She looked so well on horseback. But, about your father. He used to come down here on circuit ; not that I ever heard he had anything to do, still he may have had—yes, he may. Your grandfather met him at some dinner, and thought him an intelligent fellow, and he asked him here ; and when the Judges came to Riverford, Lester always came too ; he saw your mother, and he used to look at her in church, he was rather good-looking, and dressed well, and could ride a horse ; one time when he came down he had been talking to my father about India, and he consulted him about an idea he had of going to Bombay. Some one had offered to do something for him there ; as he was talking, your mother went into the room and heard what his views were. I don't know if she said anything, or only looked, but in the morning came a note to her from him, enclosing the letter from his friend in India, and saying, ' If you bid me go, I go at once ; but, if you wish me

to stay, I will stay for you. Write me word by the messenger.'

"She ran with the letter to your grandfather's study; he was not there, he was gone out. She sat down at his desk, took a sheet of paper, and wrote just the one word Lester wanted—'Stay.'

"So he staid, and they were married.

"I think he is kind to her—she always says he is; and I think she is happy, but she would not tell me if she was not."

Miss Blount's voice died away; the sun was gone down, only a golden radiance remained, and the silence was very sweet. Rose broke it by saying, in a tender, thoughtful voice,

"Then they loved each other really. They love each other now."

And once more the silence fell.

"If you please, ma'am, could you speak to a young woman to-night?" said Ann the housemaid, walking demurely up to the Summer-house, and thinking that the dew was falling, and Miss Rose's white dress would not be good for much to-morrow.

"Where is she? Who is she? Could she come in the morning?"

"Well, ma'am, I don't know ; she's a stranger to me, and she seems in trouble, poor thing, so I asked her into the kitchen."

"Yes, yes, then I'll come to her at once."

"Well, Mary !" she began, when the young woman had been shown into the dining-room, "what did you want with me?"

Miss Blount called every servant Mary, until a more intimate acquaintance made her find out that there were other Christian names in use amongst the English people.

"Oh, ma'am, I made bold to come to you, but everyone says you are so good and kind, and have a good heart—and the Lord knows it is a good heart I want" (the girl did her best to restrain her sobs, the tears would not be denied, and they fell from time to time in great heavy drops), "for I'm in sore trouble. I don't know whatever I shall do, I don't know what'll become of me, I don't even know where to go to to-night. Could you, ma'am—would you tell me what's best to do ? Can you send me to anyone ? God knows I will try to be a good girl."

"Listen now, Mary ! I don't even know who you are, or where you come from ; you had better

begin at the beginning, and then perhaps I can help you. Sit down there, and tell me as well as you can."

"My name is Ellen Ward, ma'am, and I lived in Hertford, but I heard of a place here in Riverford, and came up to it. I had been out before as housemaid to Mrs. Burt, a grocer's wife in Hertford, and the wages Mr. Drake offered were much higher, so I came to better myself. Mr. Drake keeps another servant, who cooks, and does for him in most things, but she's getting on in years. He took a deal of notice of me, and made quite a fuss with me at first, and I suppose I liked it, and was pleased. You'd say I was vain, ma'am, wouldn't you? When it's too late one can see where one's done wrong. He took me out to drive twice, and I saw no harm, till my fellow-servant told me to mind what I was about; and then I think it must have been too late, for master was very set on me. He took me to the Summer fair this time year. I did try to get off going, but he took the housekeeper as well as me, and then I couldn't say more; but in the afternoon he took care to lose her somewhere about, and he took

me into the dancing-tent, and then gave me some dinner, and he walked about alone with me, and said things to me—things he didn't ought to have said. I was frightened of him, but more frightened to say anything to cross him, for he can be dreadfully angry when he likes; then I said I'd like to go back to the dancing, and he said I should if I would give him a kiss now, and if I promised to do all he wanted; and he went on a great deal of what he'd do for me. However, at last we went into the tent, and he hadn't got his kiss (I beg your pardon, ma'am, for talking so), but I suppose he thought he would get his own way some time. There, standing leaning against one of the tent poles, was a young man, who came sometimes to the master's shop, and whom I'd often seen; he wished us good evening, and asked to dance with me, and I don't know how it was, but I danced twice with him, and I told him, too, I was frightened of master; he said I was to leave it to him, and he 'ud settle it all; and I thought he would, for he was a gentleman, and such a fine strong young man, quite as big as master. Well, ma'am, master and

he had some words—whether it was about him dancing with me, or because he gave me a fairing, or because he told me not to drink some wine master had brought me, I know it made me understand that master meant no good by me; so when master told me it was time to go home, I looked at the gentleman, as much as to say, ‘You’ll come along with us?’ Anyway, he did come, and master went into the house as mad as mad, and when the gentleman asked me at the door, I gave him the kiss I would not give to master. I beg your pardon, ma’am, I’m sure. They had a bad quarrel, and they struggled together, but the young man got the better, for master was hurt. I don’t know all they said, only the gentleman told master he ought to be ashamed, and that he’d better mind what he was about, or he would certainly thrash him. And I was afraid, and tried to keep out of master’s way, and to behave myself, and not let him be talking ill to me. But the young gentleman I often saw again; I used to meet him of an evening, and sometimes I got a bit of a walk with him, and he was always kind to me; and it came to that that when he asked me if I could love him

—oh! ma'am, I didn't know how to say no to him; my love was all I had to give, and it seemed such a little, and him begging for it so much! I trusted him so, and he's gone and left me."

"And who is this gentleman, as you call him, Ellen?" asked Miss Blount, in a low, troubled voice. Had any been present who knew Miss Blount, they would have been surprised at her emotion. One of the habits she had acquired in her solitary life was the use of snuff, but she did not indulge it except under unusual pressure. The silver box stood on the table by her side, and she helped herself to a large pinch now.

"Please, ma'am, don't ask me his name; it does not matter to anyone, and my sorrow is all the same."

"Well, but if you come to ask me to help you, I have a right to know the whole story, I think."

"Yes, ma'am, that is true; but—oh! pray don't make me tell you this! Besides," and she burst out sobbing, "master said this morning that he's gone away out of England for ever:

He tried to tell me lately about his going away, and wanted to make me think it was best for him ; but I said I would go too, and he didn't want that. He tried to make me see, but I cried and worried him, I think. There would be no good in my telling. I don't want to blame him with others—it's bad enough for me to blame him. I didn't think he'd go, and leave me quite like this. I thought he meant he loved me really, for he promised to marry me, and always behaved kind to me. I was fond of him, and I am fond of him now. It doesn't seem as if he cared much for me, or minded his promise ; but then he was a gentleman, and——”

“Nonsense about his being a gentleman—his conduct in leaving you has not been that of a gentleman. Do you think it was?”

“I don't think he was rich at all. Perhaps he thought he couldn't marry me, a servant girl. I don't think, ma'am, you ladies understand all the things we servants think of, and have to put up with—and, indeed, I don't understand myself; only it seems hard that it's only me that has to bear the sorrow. Master went on and miscalled me this morning, and I

was angry and ran away. I can't go back there again, and I've been out in the fields all day thinking, and when the evening fell I got up and came to you. I thought, maybe, you'd tell me what's best to do. I'll do whatever you say, and I'll be a good girl; he's gone away, and there's no one to care for."

She sat with clasped hands, and big tears came into her eyes and fell one by one, and she sobbed once or twice. Miss Blount took a huge pinch of snuff, and cleared her throat before she said,

"I think you had better go home. I suppose you have a home; you shall stay here to-night, and to-morrow I will send you home, and write to ask your parents to be kind to you, and believe your story; for your conduct, in running away from Mr. Drake's, would make many people believe you were not a good girl, Ellen. You have exposed yourself to the greatest suspicions. I am inclined to believe you, because you do not speak evil of this man you loved, who has been hard-hearted enough to leave you. You have a father?"

"Yes, I have a father, but he's married

again, and they don't want me at home. Step-mother isn't exactly unkind, but she don't want me. To-day I have been thinking of how dreadful it would be for father to be angry, and for me to lose my character; and I am frightened now at what I have done. I seem as if I had never thought at all before in all my life."

"How came your father to let you come to service in a single man's house? It was wrong of him. You ought to have had a mistress to look after you. I wonder he did not think of the risk you ran," said Miss Blount, in a voice more husky and troubled than ever.

"Why, he wanted me gone, and stepmother urged him to the place, as good pay; they've got little children at home now, and they couldn't have me on their hands; and, indeed, ma'am, I don't know that the likes of us ever do think. O Lord! Lord! you're crying—you're sorry for me—you believe me? I was so afraid no one would again!" cried the girl, flinging herself down at Miss Blount's knees. "I don't know that ever anyone cared for me before but him; and after all he's gone away! I had no other friend but him since mother was

took by fever, and then she cried over leaving me alone in the world. Oh ! I'll work, I'll work, and do all you tell me, if you'll give me the chance !”

The girl was sobbing violently. Miss Blount wiped her eyes and blew her nose—she had had a great deal of snuff.

“ You seem to me to forget that God knows all you do, and that He could and would always take care of you, in whatever trouble and sorrow you are,” she said slowly, and with mingled sadness and tenderness.

“ I remember now,” answered the girl, in low, awe-struck tones, and raising herself from the ground. “ I have forgotten Him often, and not prayed to Him ; but He don't forget me.”

Deep in her heart Miss Blount said, “ This girl is honest, and her future may be saved ;” and added, almost audibly, “ I am not sent but to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” Then she said to Ellen,

“ Go and ring the bell, and then sit down quietly. Trust me.”

When the servant came, she bade her take the

young woman into the kitchen and give her some supper.

"Make up the little bed in the laundry for her, and let her go to bed at once; and to-morrow I will send her home," she said. "Good night, Ellen."

"Good night, ma'am, and humbly thank you."

"Auntie, dear!" Rose's voice broke the stillness of the darkening room. "Are you alone, and sitting here in the dark?" She struck a match and lighted the candles on the side-board. "What is the matter, Aunt Hannah?" for she was startled at the pained expression in her face. "You have been crying!" and she wound her arms about the elder woman's neck and kissed her. "May I not know what has grieved you?"

"I have been face to face with ignorance and sorrow. We who are rich, and who can learn, have, I fear, a terrible reckoning before us some time. We do not help others enough. The longer I live, the more difficult it seems to me to read the riddles of this world. Pray, Rose, pray!—pray that you may not enter into temp-

tation, and pray for all that are tempted."

That night, in the quiet of her own room, Hannah Blount wrote to a clergyman in a neighbouring parish—an old man who was her friend.

"I shall be in Thornfield to-morrow. I mean to place a young woman in the care of old Mrs. —, for some weeks. I believe her sad story, though some would not. With God's blessing, all may go well. She has put herself in an awkward position. I mean to provide for her, and will give her a character at any time; for I must tell you she has laid herself open to very grave suspicion. We must save her from the effects of her own rashness and thoughtlessness. You will go and see her, and by-and-by we must find her a situation."

CHAPTER VIII.

LONDON in its best quarters is a dreary, dusty-looking place in Summer. It is all very well to go there for a day's shopping or sight-seeing, when the thermometer stands at 84 in the shade, and when in the country the bees are humming through a wilderness of wild and garden blossoms, and the cattle are standing in shady pools, or under spreading trees with massive dark green foliage, silent in the still, hot air. But to live there at such a season is an earthly purgatory, and those who are forced to do it have a weary, jaded, dispirited look. In the narrow, swarming streets at the East-end this is very striking, and in the close, over-breathed air there seems to be some latent irritant that makes the denizens of that quarter

hasty in temper, angry in tongue, ready to take offence.

In the neighbourhood of the river especially is this air irritant observable. Usually a river has a curiously soothing and humanizing influence, but here it has been usurped by the necessities of commerce, its smooth highway is infected and discoloured by filth and profanities, and the press and hurry of human beings, the crowding and hustling of each other, has an evil influence upon the people. Every man seeks his own advancement and comfort—if such a word be admissible in such a place—none caring if, in seeking, he interferes with his neighbour. All is coarse, brutal indifference, varied with intemperate laughter and indecent songs.

It may be said the picture is highly coloured, and the people are not so bad. Nay the people are bad because of their surroundings. The colour of the background is the excuse for the reflection upon the figures. How can people struggling in dirt, and heat, and foulness, take other than an evil taint from them? For the life of the soul to be pure, the body must have some purity of life, certain grand examples to

the contrary notwithstanding. Though it was spoken in an Eastern land that "cleanliness was next to godliness," where the absolute necessity of the doctrine makes itself apparent, its truth is as evident in our own clime and in our own day. Granting its truth, then, what must be the responsibility of those in whose hands lies the extirpation of abuses? What can be said of those "who lay house to house, and field to field, till they leave no place," driving the poorer orders to congregate in evil and unwholesome quarters, cut off from the light and air of Heaven, to which they have an equal right, by virtue of their human shape, and leaving them there to fester, and form the plague-spot to spread, and ruin all the body politic of the noblest State. Let those who legislate, who have the power even of life and death over many, look to these things in time; there is a fearful retribution for errors, sins like these. They lie soft, and live delicately; let them consider the needs of others. Let them beware of the expression, in the hour of strife, "Man, who gave thee authority over me?" lest He who alone can give authority, in the shape

of higher intelligence, and higher moral feeling, asking what they have done with the trust, should receive but a hesitating, stammering answer, and should turn away His face, saying, "Inasmuch as ye did it not to one of these, ye did it not to Me."

On a hot evening in August, Mrs. Barton went to London, and made her way to a small inn in Limehouse. She observed the heat, the foul, stifling air, the cross, quarrelsome appearance of the people she passed by, but her heart was engrossed in her own troubles, and she passed lightly by those of others. The people lingering about the door drew back when she got out of the cab, and ordered the portmanteau to be lifted down. They knew her for a lady by her voice and manner—by the propriety of her dress, too, though it was poor enough. They looked at her for a minute with a stupid stare of mere observation, without the slightest interest. Seeing the portmanteau too heavy for the cabman, she said, smiling,

"Will one of you kindly lend him a hand? It is my boy's luggage—he is stopping here."

"Yes, and welcome," came the answer, and

two or three strong arms went to work. The ugly, stolid figures that looked as if they had been roughly cast, and then coloured over, and very badly done, too, softened now by the reflection from the sun of kindness shining in her face.

Edmund heard his mother's voice, and joined her below. He looked pale and tired, but there was no hesitation or timidity in his manner. His deep blue eyes met hers fully, his hand clasped hers firmly, and his voice was quiet; he was more self-possessed, more manly than she had ever seen him, and as he stooped and kissed her, greeting her with the words, "I knew you would come, mother, darling," she felt that, right or wrong, he had taken possession of himself; his life was in his own hand—his childhood was gone—he was a man.

"He's a fine-grown young fellow, any way," said one idler to another, as mother and son entered the house together.

"Ay, that he is, and her own son, too, no mistake. Goin' abroad, I should say, the lad. More to be done there than in the old country for a fellow like him. He could fight his way,

and fend for himself, I know. Look at his arms and shoulders ; and did you see his bright eye? That's a man one would be proud to follow as a leader."

"Perhaps he's her only one ; his mother'll break her heart over him. Mothers is as jealous as beasts over their lads."

"Not she—she's a fine old gal. Didn't you see her head up, like our new'dray-horse—looks as if you'd never get the collar over his head ; but them proud uns are good uns to pull—what parson says, when I goes to hear un, which ain't often that I troubles him" (this was considered wit, and was laughed at accordingly), "mean to do their duty, and do it too. And she'll not take on, but just give him her blessin', and let him go ; though, maybe, she'd like to go along with him, unless she's got other ones at home, as is likely."

So they talked out in the steaming, darkening evening, uncouth in form, and ill-clad ; but the great human heart is much the same everywhere, when it can get expression out of the thick, overlying crust of vulgarity, brutality, or self-indulgence.

Edmund led his mother into a little parlour, which she had leave to use, as gay and clean-looking as white muslin curtains, white netted chair-covers, and a light wall-paper, all over impossible roses and pinks, could make it.

“Good mother!” he said—“good, kind mother, to make no bother about things, but just to come and bring my clothes. You made up your mind that I meant to go away, when I said so?”

“Yes, Ned; the step was so sudden and so grave that I felt it could not be retracted. When do you go, my boy, and where?”

“To Australia, the day after to-morrow. You shall go down and see the ship to-morrow. Don’t look sad, mother; I shall do better there than I could have done here. Out-of-door life suits me, and, if I keep my health, I shall be all right. I am not afraid. I could not stay at home. It was weak to run away from my difficulties, but I am strong enough now, and shall make a good fight abroad. I would have enlisted, but though I have not been brought up a fine gentleman, I have hardly been used to the horrors of a private soldier’s life in bar-

racks. I have seen something of that, and it is vile."

"Indeed that would have grieved me, and your uncle Durrant is a commissioned officer!—no, there are some things that even in our modest position cannot be done. But, Ned, it is then decided you must go without fail?"

He shook his head.

"And why?—what is it, Ned?—what have you done?"

He got up, walked across the room, and leaned out of the window; then, turning round, he said,

"Mother, dear, the night will soon have fallen; it will be still and quiet outside. If you are not too tired, I will take you down to the river; the moon will be up, and some of the streets are as quiet as the grave. I can talk to you best outside. You will have some tea first?"

Mother-like, she began to question her son about his health. He was pale, she thought. London could not suit a country boy like him. Did he take proper care of himself, and would he promise her to do so? He smiled, and let

her talk; when she had finished her tea, he drew her hand through his arm, and took her out.

It was very silent, and a little wind was creeping about from the river; the awkward, irregular houses, placed at angles to each other, stood now in deep shadow, now in the full flood of silver light, the forests of dark masts stood like carefully-lopped trees, black against the sky, which was so bright that it seemed to keep its blue colour, and twinkling lights shone from houses along the river banks, and from the vessels that lay at anchor. A shipman's cry was heard now and then, a whistle, snatches of songs, and the distant roar of the great city that was not yet hushed.

There Ned Barton told his mother the story of the last few months of his life—all but the request he had made to Rose Lester. He felt sure that Rose had granted it, otherwise the first thing his mother would have said was that Gilbert Drake was bemoaning everywhere the loss of his money. If the matter were ever to be told, Rose herself must tell it.

“Do you remember, mother,” Ned said, after

walking along silently, "saying to me one night, 'These things end badly?' They have ended badly. I did not intend to break my word to you; I did not intend to break it either to that poor child. My father sent me once or twice during the Winter to Drake's. I saved her from insult once from him; opportunities served me, and I saw Ellen often. I was idle, the girl's preference flattered my stupid vanity. I really liked her, and I promised to marry her. I tried a short time ago to bring her to see it would be good for me to go away, to go abroad; but she cried bitterly, and then she wanted to go with me—begged and prayed me to take her. I have sometimes thought lately that Drake would have got me into trouble if he could, and been glad, but I have no means of proving this. Were I rich I might have been with impunity, and almost without blame, a worse man than I am. I know and understand it all now, now that it is too late. I might have stayed at home and married Ellen, or taken her abroad with me, but I do not want her, nor do I wish to marry her; I ought not to do so, for I do not love her now, and I saw no way out of the difficulty

but this one of flight. There were some things I did not know how to face. I daresay people will say I am a coward, and cruel to go, but I must bear that blame. I want to do what is right, and I see no safety but in flight. I am flying from myself as much as from poor little Ellen. My instinct of flight was a true one, I think, and I followed it."

"You are not in debt, Ned!—that was what I feared."

"No, mother, all my debts are paid. I have settled about them; but you were right—I could not play to win, it was all lose for me. I have learnt my lesson hard in many ways, and bitterly regret what I am. It cannot be helped now. I was not fit for any other fate, perhaps, than that I am going to meet. Some people want a deal of education. However, the past is past. I am going into the future—so far away, so utterly unknown. You will think of me, you will pray for me out there" (he fondled her hand as he spoke); "and there is one thing—if you can possibly get to see Ellen, without others thinking that it is on my account—for that would only hurt her, do so, and help her to a live-

lihood, if you can ; you have friends you might interest for her. I feel like a scoundrel when I think of her, now I am quiet here with you. How differently one thinks and judges at different times ! Sometimes I have felt able to work hard, and be as self-denying as you are, disregarding the scorn of other people ; sometimes I have liked nothing but self-indulgence, and desired wealth and the smile of the world. I think the state of my mind these few days must be like that of a dying man's."

" ' Rejoice, oh ! young man, in thy youth, and let thy heart cheer thee in the days of thy youth, and walk in the ways of thine heart, and in the sight of thine eyes ; but know thou that for all these things God will bring thee into judgment ! ' " quoted Mrs. Barton. " The conclusion of the matter, as Solomon says, is, after all, ' Fear God, and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man ! ' "

Then they turned back, walking silently, till, just as they reached the inn, Ned stopped in the wonderful light that seemed to make all coarse and common things fair and pure.

" Had I remained in England, mother, I should

have loved Rose Lester. Don't misunderstand me. I go in time; but since I have seen her my thoughts are changed. Your warnings to me saved me from committing a great crime, and knowing her saved me from spoiling all my life by marrying a woman I did not really love—of whom one day I should have been ashamed."

Edmund Barton had taken his resolution of leaving home on the day when Rose had seen him wandering in the moonlight with Ellen. He had thought of going from the time when he had ceased to meet Rose on her way home from the drawing-lesson. His heart had come to the conclusion that by so meeting her he was wronging her and Ellen too. He made all inquiries, and all his plans, alone. What was the use of grieving those who would, he knew well, keep his secret? The time was ripe.

His father came up to see him the day the ship sailed, and brought him money, and an introduction from his uncle Charles. His uncle, Captain Fielding, to whom his mother had written in haste, as soon as she knew her son's intentions, and who sent her at once funds for

his use, ran up from Woolwich to bid the lad God speed.

“Cheer up, Maria,” the Captain said; “the young fellow knows what he is about. He’ll do, and be a credit to you yet. Between you and me, I never could think an office-stool was the place for him. Why, his very arms and legs were thrown away there. He would have liked the army, of course, with plenty of foreign service, but that could not be. Never mind, he will fall on his feet in Australia. Go, my boy, and God bless you! Write to me sometimes, and tell me all about yourself; and if you want a lift now and then, I will help you. Let me know where you settle, and I will look up some introductions for you. We shall have you home again quite a traveller, and an authority on Australian matters. I have only one bit of good advice to give you—Fear God, and honour the Queen, and keep your hand steady, and you’ll do. You will come back all the better for this voyage, and seeing the world.”

Ned held his mother’s hand, and looked her in the face, but neither thought to see the other again. The distance was so great, the future

so utterly hidden, that this was to them like the parting of death.

The *Queen* sailed out of the London docks, down the river, out into the Channel, and not till after many months would there be news of the tall blue-eyed youth, whose heart was firm and lips smiling, when his mother gave him her last kiss and blessing.

Ned was gone, the father and mother returned alone to their desolate cottage. Victor snuffed about them, and lifted loving, imploring eyes, as if he asked for news, and then turned away with a low, prolonged howl. Ned's departure was of course talked of, but no one knew the whole case; after awhile it ceased to be the last piece of news, and died away, like other nine-days' wonders. Another clerk was found to occupy his stool in the office at the Brewery; his sisters and his father got used to his absence; his mother and his dog alone kept him in their heart of hearts.

Mrs. Barton sent a person whom she could trust one day to ask for Ellen Ward, at Mr. Drake's, and was answered that the young woman had gone home.



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BOOK II.

The world was all before them where to choose
Their place of rest ; and Providence their guide.

My native land, good-night.



CHAPTER I.

IT was quiet weather, with a light wind, when the *Queen* spread out her sails, and passed slowly round the English coast. With loving, lingering eyes Edmund Barton studied every bay and headland as they faded one by one. On the fourth day, in moonlight, the ship made her way into the open sea, and bade a long farewell to the shores of England. Edmund had no idea till now that he had loved his country, loved it with the unconscious, unreasoning affection of a child to its parent. He had never known how beautiful his England was till he looked on her for the last time! It was but another reading of the adage: Only in parting do the gods make themselves known.

So still and clear were these Summer days, that every little village was plain to the youth's

sight ; the sunlight fell upon the lovely sweeping landscape, the green undulating downs, the richness of the woodland, and the ripe glory of the corn ; and when the moon rose the scene was even fairer, and more tender ; and in the greater stillness the very sound of voices was faintly heard from shore. On the last night he sat on deck alone and silent—the captain left him undisturbed, because he was so quiet ; and his heart was busy with the past. The pupils of his blue eyes were very large and dark, and as the last faint streak of grey coast faded into the distance, a few heavy tears swelled and rolled over the brown lashes. The fresh wind dried the drops upon his cheek, and his lips were firmly set. What would the future bring ?

So comfortably arranged, so interesting, from the great variety of the route, has now become the overland journey to Australia, that the tediousness and annoyances of such a long voyage as Ned's are almost unendurable.

There are curious lessons of forbearance and patience to be learned on a long sea-voyage, and many, though perhaps not very brilliant opportunities are given for self-sacrifice and

moral courage, for cheerfulness and kindness, under the difficulties and disagreeables of close quarters, coarse ill-served food, the privation of personal cleanliness, and bad sleeping accommodation. Ned often spoke of his voyage to Australia in after-years as one of his schools.

On board the *Queen* were the usual great diversities of persons and characters that each one encounters in the world, of which a large vessel is but a smaller type; only that in the world one meets good as well as bad specimens of humanity; and, in the ship bound for Australia, Ned met very bad specimens, with the exception of the little children, and a few of the women—the simple homely country folk, who went to the far land across the waters, whence they might probably never return, and of which, if truth were told, they were horribly afraid, because Tom or Jack was going, and was, he said, sure of doing well; and the wife's place was by her husband's side.

Selfishness and brutality, quarrelling and foul language, surrounded the young man; and the wearisome, hourly association of people from

whom he could not escape pressed upon him. Many a time he passionately wished that he had not, under the pressure of circumstances, exchanged known for unknown evils. His spirit often waxed faint, his heart died within him, and the weary day, with its ugly common facts, seemed three times its natural length; but then would come the night, with the glory of moon or stars, and the ever-wonderful, unspeakable silence of the ocean—that silence that nothing earthly seems to break, though the wind may sweep so wildly, and the waves roll in thunder.

Ned was so quiet, so helpful to everyone, so ready to obey orders, that the captain relaxed discipline for him, and gave him every indulgence in his power, especially that, to Ned, great indulgence of letting him remain on deck at all hours—even to sleeping there. During the day he studied the few books his thoughtful mother had packed for him—the History of England, a Manual of the Natural Orders of Plants, Shakespeare's Plays, and Sidney Hall's great Atlas. Over the latter he would pore untiringly, tracing the ship's course on the map

of the world, and studying the map of Australia, that land which was to be his home. He would cut paper figures to amuse the children; from little pieces of wood, begged from the ship's carpenter, he carved spoons, with elaborate handles, and boxes for snuff or needles; for Ned's big hands could serve him in various needs. At night, alone with the ocean and his own heart, the two most wonderful of God's works, because of their unfathomable mysteries, feeling so mere a speck in the universe, and yet having his allotted task in it to fulfil, he sat and thought, passing in review his early life, bitterly regretting his wrongdoing, and remembering with tenderest affection the dear ones at home. Sometimes his mood was dark, and he felt as if there could be no rest or peace for him; then he would sit wakeful all night, or lean over the ship's side, watching the waste of waters, and the phosphorescent gleam in the vessel's wake. Sometimes he fell asleep, and the captain or mate in his rounds would stoop over the lad, and seeing the peaceful expression on his features, would

smile, and mutter to himself, "Dreaming of his mother, I'll be sworn!"

Of any places of interest on the voyage to Sydney, Edmund saw only the Peak of Teneriffe, a pale, blue spire, tipped with light, for the ship did not touch at any port; but of natural objects he saw many of which he had only read before. Dolphins, flying-fish, sharks, and stormy petrels, and the great albatross, lazily balanced, and seemingly lying upon the air, supported by its broad wings. As other travellers have felt, so did he feel, a sudden pang and pressure at his heart when the constellation of the Great Bear, known so well to his early childhood, after nearing the horizon night after night, rose no more upon his sight; and the Southern Cross came to offer itself, but never to fill in his mind the vacant place. He learned to mark the variety of the wind's voices, to note the many changes of the colour of the sea; as he neared the new country, his face grew thin and eager with excitement, for he was nerving himself to meet the shock of an entirely strange and hazardous life.

Then came a day long looked for, when floating weeds and shore-haunting birds appeared, and the strange sweet odour of violets was wafted on the light wind, blowing off shore towards the *Queen*, and that which seemed a dark grey mist took shape and substance, and loomed at last the huge rock-portals of Port Jackson. Between the stern headlands, seven hundred feet of granite sheer above the sea, swept bare by the winds, and beaten by the surging waves, which sprang as if in baffled wrath, and spouted sheets of foam against their impassible sides—passed the *Queen*, and cast anchor, on a bright morning, in Sydney harbour.

The sun was shining on the blue waters of the bay, and gilding the sails of the numberless craft lying at anchor, or gliding about; the white villas of the richer citizens gleamed from masses of shrubs and trees along the shore, and from the water's edge, up a gentle slope some miles from the entrance of the harbour, was spread the city of Sydney.

Ned had never been in Scotland, or he might have remarked a certain resemblance, though on

a larger scale, to the Clyde at Rothesay or Dunoon.

Bewildered, and almost stunned by the strangeness and loneliness of his position, and half frightened at the actual presence of what he had desired, Ned went on shore. He had money in his pocket, fine health, and a powerful frame; he was alone, and free to go whither he would—but whither? He had made no friends on board the *Queen*, his nature being of the receptive kind, that does not take, but is taken; to his fellow-travellers he had offered no particular attraction—he was kind, but not loud or jolly, and he was not rich.

Ned's bewilderment was not lessened as he passed the quays up into the narrow streets of the town, so like London, and heard everywhere his own English tongue. Surely it was home again—another London here on the opposite side of the globe, with curious discrepancies. It was December, and yet nearly the hottest month of the Australian year. The trees and plants were quite new to him; geraniums and cactus were growing large and flowering in the common garden hedges, finer

than he had ever seen in Lady Riverford's conservatories. The birds were brilliant—parrots and white cockatoos. His grandmother Fielding had bought a gaudy-plumaged parrot of the same sort in Altcaster when he was a child, of a brown-faced sailor with rings in his ears. But the human beings about him were unmistakably English and Scotch, though some wore lighter clothing than is worn at home; and some, low-browed, furtive-eyed, or ruffianly, hardened-looking men;—were they—or had they been convicts?

There were handsome shops, fine horses and carriages, with well-dressed women seated in them; and there a group of natives dressed, the women especially, in the most startling raiments, with neither fitness nor propriety—which clothing they would probably (as, indeed, in after-times Ned saw them do more than once) strip from them as soon as they were well out of the precincts of the town, and carry home to their bark huts in a bundle under their arms. At these people Ned looked long and earnestly, with a certain shrinking and horror; the longer he looked the more forbidding appeared the dark skin,

and the hideously animal cruel heads and faces of this lowest type of the human race.

In this strange new world wandered Edmund Barton, a country-bred boy, knowing nothing of England but his own county and London. He turned into the hotel that the captain of the *Queen* had recommended to him, too tired in mind and body, from the overwhelming sensations of these first few hours, to eat the meal he had ordered, and listening with rapt and silent attention to the talk going on around him.

So he passed a week, wandering about the city and its environs, silent for the most part, but sometimes rousing himself to talk to the strangers that surrounded him. He amused himself, as a young man may, going to the theatres and various places of public resort, never tiring in the study of this new phase of life. But he began to tire of being alone, this country boy. He got into no scrapes, was never noisy or disorderly, but went his way alone, no one heeding him; he was not strange enough in that ever-changing throng to attract much attention from others; he was a new-comer, that was all, and thoroughly English in his tall, muscu-

lar frame, curling brown hair, and blue eyes.

He had been used to work since his boyhood, and now, in his loneliness, he began to feel that it was an actual necessity to him. He took his uncle's letter of introduction, and presented himself in George Street, at that time the chief mercantile quarter of the city, at the offices of the man to whom it was addressed. Mr. Dawson read the letter attentively, and glanced once or twice inquiringly at the young man before him; then sat meditatively biting the end of a cedar pencil—sometimes shaking his head slightly, sometimes compressing his lips.

“So you want something to do in colonial life, young sir?” he said at last. “Your uncle writes that you did not like the post you held in his Brewery. I wonder what he thinks I can do for you? I am only a merchant myself, and have high stools, and clerks out there in the offices. Young fellows don't like things at home, and so they come out here, half of them knowing nothing, and most of them wanting to be masters before they have learned to rule. They can't do anything, and don't know what they

want—useless to other people and a nuisance to themselves. However,”—and once more he bit the pencil’s end and shook his head ; then he began again, scarcely so much addressing Ned as narrating for some shadowy audience—“Charles Barton was a school-fellow of mine, and a good fellow too ; kept out of scrapes, did Charles, never quarrelled—a regular peace-maker. He did well in the old country, I should say, but hadn’t ‘go’ enough in him for here. Now I liked the chance and risk—didn’t care for the humdrum of English business ; but the queer ups and downs here put me on my mettle, and made me use my wits, and I have been successful. It’s a queer world ! Charles remembers his old chum, and sends his nephew to find him at the Antipodes. Charles and I have written now and then, and done some business here and there for each other—but it is some time since I have heard from Charles. Young man,”—looking Ned suddenly in the face—“what are you good for ?—what can you do ?”

A smile broke over Ned’s face as he slowly measured with his eyes the length of his limbs,

stretched out one arm a little, and surveyed his large but well-shaped hand, as he had often done at home, but he said not a word.

"Yes, a fine, big fellow!" said Mr. Dawson, laughing, as he followed the direction of Ned's eyes—"that's about what you were thinking—eh?"

"Well, I fancy I have got some work in me; I can ride, and I can shoot——"

"Just so," interrupted Mr. Dawson; "you thought it would be fine fun to come out here, and ride about and play the sporting gentleman; a great many fellows who had a pretty turn for hunting and shooting at home, and small means to gratify it, have come with that idea and hope. And precious they found themselves mistaken. I could show you half-a-dozen such out of that window in the course of the day; one man I know is a light porter, and one I saw house-painting, and another is a newspaper boy. However, your instinct as to your strong arms is right enough, so far that they were given you to work with, if you are in the mind to make them work. Come," he went on, rising from his chair and

clapping Ned on the shoulder, as he observed the flushed cheek and the blue eyes looking straight before them with a certain pain in them, "don't be offended with me. I wanted to try you a little, and see if you were too big for colonial shoes. I'm afraid I can't do much for you myself, but perhaps I can put you in the way. As I told you, here am I a merchant, shipping-agent, broker—what you like. In New York they'd say I keep a store. I fancy with those shoulders, and liking horse-flesh, you don't want to be cooped up here in a city, to hear the noise and feel the heat of Sydney. I haven't done anything in the land and cattle line myself, but I have dreams on that subject. My daughter thinks nothing in the world would be so delightful as to ride miles upon miles after emus or kangaroos; though she has been educated at a fashionable school in Sydney, she prefers a free country life—at least, she thinks so now. In obtaining land, of course you require capital to make sheep or cattle farming pay; you must have a good 'run,' taking care that it is near a 'creek,' and well watered; and you must have it properly stocked; you could

not do with less than so much land and so many head of cattle—but that means money? Have you got money?—can you lay out at once nine hundred pounds? I need not say I could not advance it to you, even if I had it to lend, because my first duties are to my own child. But if you had double the money yourself, I would still give you this bit of advice: Learn how to use it first; go to some one who has lands and herds, and get him to let you see how he treats them before you touch an acre on your own account.”

“I had never built my hopes very high,” said Ned, quietly, as soon as he found an opportunity of speaking. “I have no capital, certainly, and I did not come to ask you to lend me a shilling. I thought I might keep myself by sheer honest work—was that too much to hope? People in England do say there is money to be made here—of course I should like to make money, if I knew how. I have a mother and sisters at home—it would make me very proud to help them.”

“Good boy! I think you may do that, if you’ll be patient; but you must not think of

being a fine gentleman in the Colonies. If you mean work, you can get work—and you shall get it, too, very soon, or my name's not Dawson. But cattle here are not like cattle at home, and farming here is not a bit like what you've seen in East Anglia. A stout heart, a strong pair of arms, and clear eyes (and you seem to have them all), with God Almighty to back you up, and you may make your way, never fear; but you'll have work, and not play, I promise you. And now, will you go in for sheep or cattle, for I may find you an employer this very afternoon?"

Thereupon the worthy merchant sat down again, and went into the details of wages, rations, occupations of a shepherd and a stockman, and Ned decided in favour of the latter office; the fact of a horse being one of its requirements was sufficient to ensure his choice.

"You come to me to-morrow or next day, at this hour, and I'll tell you what success I've had for you. No, no—no thanks; my old chum's nephew is heartily welcome to anything I can do for him, and we have a pretty good name in Sydney for lending the helping hand.

I have an engagement this afternoon, or I would ask you to take a chop with me; but that shall be for next time—eh? Good-bye now—good-bye.”

Ned walked along the matted passage, and on the doorsteps he met a young lady with dark hair and eyes, dressed with great care, and producing a very brilliant effect. Unlearned in feminine matters, he would still have said she was dressed in the height of the fashion, but the bright eyes and delicate English complexion would have made even the plainest costume attractive, and the young man involuntarily turned to look at her when he was in the street, and then heard her say to the old female servant with her,

“Go and ask if papa is within, and disengaged.”

Was this Mr. Dawson’s daughter—the girl who wanted to hunt emus and kangaroos—wearing delicate blue silk, and as fair as his own sisters in cooler England? Perhaps the next time he went to the office he might see her again; perhaps—there were many perhaps, and as he walked along the streets, admiring

the richly-decked shops, the peculiarities of colonial life were very vivid to him, though he would have found himself sadly at a loss to describe them in words, and he was in even greater confusion of ideas than on the day he landed from the *Queen*.

"Dear papa," was Miss Dawson's first exclamation when she entered the office, "who was the young man on the steps? An Englishman, I am sure, and so good-looking!"

"So are you English, my dear."

"Oh, yes!" with a little petulant shrug of the shoulders; "but he was English born, and not colonial—the difference is immense." There was a strongly-marked tone of depreciation in her voice; and then she went on—"But who is he, and what has he come out here for? He does not look as if he had been doing anything wrong, and what did he come to you for?"

"My dear Zara, I never knew you so inquisitive before. I cannot get you to take common heed of many young men to whom I could wish you were civil, at least."

"Colonial, papa," interrupted she, with a scornful smile.

"This young fellow has come out on the same errand on which they all come—money, my dear—the almighty dollar! He is the nephew of an old schoolfellow of mine, who sent him to me, hoping I might give him a lift."

"And you have not asked him home to Richmond?" (the name of Mr. Dawson's villa on the banks of Sydney Cove). "That is not hospitable, papa, and you must want to know so much about your old friend. Pray ask him to Richmond."

"My dear, he hasn't a shilling," answered the merchant drily, "and he wants to get employment as a stockman."

"Oh!" was all Zara's answer; but she frowned and pouted as a spoilt child will, and was very sullen and difficult to please during the afternoon drive with her father, which was hard upon him, poor man, as he could not help Edmund Barton's penniless condition, nor his need of active occupation.

The guests at Richmond found Zara Dawson for a long time after this incident haughtier in manner, and more sarcastic in tongue than had been her habit, and several times she made

severe comparisons between English and Australians, to the disadvantage of the latter, and to the great annoyance of such of them as were present.

"Of course," she would say, with a sneer, and a toss of her pretty head, *à propos* to any person or thing that went wrong, or was found wanting, "what could you expect. He, she, or it was colonial."

On the day appointed, Ned presented himself again at Mr. Dawson's offices, and found another person there before him, talking fast in a loud, cheery voice. He ceased speaking for an instant, turned round in his chair, and looked intently at the young man, as Mr. Dawson said, shaking hands with Ned,

"Mr. McLean, this is Mr. Edmund Barton, of whom I have already spoken to you. How are you to-day, Barton?"

McLean nodded his rough head, half shut his eyes under the massive, overhanging brows, as if to retain a picture formed there, then turned back again, and continued his conversation at the point where he had broken off, leaving Ned opportunity to observe his future employer.

He was a strongly-built, broad-shouldered man, about fifty, wearing a coat of broad-cloth, in compliment to his being in the city, though it was a garment in which he was but ill-at-ease. On the ground beside him was his "bell-topper" (hat), also worn in complimentary fashion in place of the sombrero, or cabbage-tree varieties that usually crowned his square-shaped head; but he could not apparently entirely divest himself of the insignia of his calling, for his legs were encased in long riding-boots, and across his knees lay a heavy stock-whip, with a long thong wound round the myrtle-tree handle. He sat astride of the corner of his chair, and was graphically describing to Mr. Dawson an excellent bargain he had made in Sydney within the week. He spoke with a strong Scotch accent, but the form of his words was entirely English, or Colonial.

"A hundred and odd of them, lean enough, but still worth more by a good deal than what I gave for them. Up from the Macquarrie country, most of them; and now I shall drive them across the Darling range on to my new 'runs' there, and a first-rate spec will it turn out.

You see how favourably things go sometimes; within the very same week of my purchase you bring me the next thing I want, a new stock-keeper. I must have hired some fellow to help me drive this 'mob.' Things go contrary most times, but then they give you a good turn all at once, if you keep your weather-eye open, as the tars say. And now, young man," he said, twisting round on the corner of his chair, and slowly surveying Ned, "you want to try your hand at stock, I hear? If you do your duty, I'll do mine. I mean what I say always, and if I drive a good bargain now and then, I mean it to be a just one on both sides. You've had time to look at me, so it's for you to say 'off' or 'on,' because I want a hand, and am willing to try you. I can't say whether you'll suit me till I have tried you. The first thing you'll have to learn is to do what I tell you, for of course you know nothing of our ways, nor our cattle's ways neither, and, by heaven! they've queer ways" (here he laughed low, with a curious inflection of the eyebrows, the inner corner of each being depressed and the outer corner elevated). "Well,

which is your word ? Time hurries, and cattle don't wait."

"On, sir !" said Ned, and looked straight into the rough-hewn but not unkindly Scotch face.

"Very good. Now then, Mr. Dawson, pen and paper, if you please, and we'll go to figures, wages, rations, and such-like. You'll live in the huts round the station, and mess with other men ; you'll get used to it. You'll have a horse to ride, and enough to do ; if things go well, we may make you or see you an overseer, perhaps an owner, some of these days. There is money to be made, and a good place to be won here for industrious men, I can tell you. But prudence and self-denial must guide a man ; there's no success without them."

So Edmund Barton bound himself to be stockman to Andrew McLean, for sixty pounds and rations the first year, and a rise, if he liked to remain ; in two days he would commence this new life in the Bush, of which he had heard so much, which had attracted his boyish thoughts, and which, now it was close at hand, was so different from what he had expected.

Then the three men adjourned to the Royal

Hotel, where they dined together, and where the two elders, who had known each other for some years, told tales of bushranging in the earlier days of the colony, and strange escapes of convicts, such as have formed the subject of many volumes read with avidity in the old country; they sat smoking in the verandah until the hot, short twilight was passed, and the stars were shining with the peculiar radiance which belongs to them in southern latitudes.

Mr. Dawson shook Ned kindly by the hand when they parted for the night, and wished him good luck, bidding him remember that he would always be glad to see him, if he came to Sydney on business, and promising that he would write to his old friend, Charles Barton, and tell him he was glad to serve his nephew. When, in a careless, casual way, Zara asked her father, weeks afterwards, what had become of the young Englishman, Ned was far away across the mountains.

CHAPTER II.

MCLEAN and his young stockman set off together for the station at which the recently-purchased cattle were waiting. This station was situated at the foot of the Blue Mountains, whose grand and varied outline Ned' had observed with deep admiration and interest from the environs of Sydney. It was his first acquaintance with mountains, and with a strange mixture of pleasure and awe he now found himself about to penetrate their mysteries, and cross their boundary into another unknown land.

The trouble and annoyance of cattle-driving is always great, but it is increased in the intricacies of mountain passes, for the animals wander wide, and have continually to be sought out

and herded together; the route has to be carefully studied, so as to gain water and shelter for the rest in the heat of the day, and to ensure some stock-yard station for the night. But McLean had been long in the country, and was an experienced herdsman.

Ned was never a great talker, but now his faculties were so absorbed in observation that words failed him entirely.

At evening his ears were attracted by the strange new sounds of the whip and the bell-bird, the short, sharp chucking bark of the opossum, and still more by the loud musical whistle of the native magpie. It was many months before he ceased to lift his head quickly at these sounds. All day long his eyes were busy with the undreamed-of world about him. The orange groves at Paramatta delighted him, in an almost childish fashion, with the sweet-scented flowers and golden fruits; he referred to them more than once in his letters to his mother, saying he remembered to have seen orange trees in Lady Riverford's conservatory, which had taken a deep hold of his boyish imagination, seeming to have a more blessed existence than

other trees. He saw the streams shrunken and shallow with Summer heat, the grass dry and whitened on the plains, in which little clumps of white gum-trees rose at rare intervals. Near the mountains he saw dense forests of blue gum, stringy bark, or iron bark trees. But the wonder of wonders to him were the mountains themselves. He had gone forward one morning with the bullock-driver, leaving McLean at the inn, and they had encamped at night with two acquaintances—a delightful event to solitary dwellers in the Bush. The mist had been thick and cold in the passes, and had blotted out all the ravines and deep gullies, only the tops of the dark gum-trees that clothed the mountain sides appeared above the fog; the track for the cattle was but just plain enough for travelling, but by noon they reached the top of the gap, and the sun shining out dispersed the shroud of vapour. Then Ned fully realized the glory of the scene before him. Peak rose above peak, some bare and scarped, some clothed with short grass, or box and pine-trees, and the deep narrow gullies, at the bottom of which he could hear the tinkle of falling water, were

disclosed to him, with their dense growth of timber trees. The bullock-driver was preparing a hasty meal under the shelter of an overhanging slab of rock, in readiness for the master's appearance.

Ned had sprung from his horse, and was leaning against his shoulder, when McLean rode up; but so intent was the young man's gaze, so deep his reverie, that he was not aware of his employer's approach till he laid his hand upon him, and asked in a kindly tone,

"Dreaming, my lad! What were you thinking of?"

"I was wishing, sir," said Ned, with the colour rushing over his face as he looked into the elder man's eyes, and gave his truthful simple answer, "I was wishing that my mother was here. How grand it is! I never saw mountains before."

There was moisture in the young man's eyes as he spoke, which did not displease McLean. Ned's habitual silence, too, was agreeable to the taciturn disposition of the Scot. He looked at him for a moment through half-closed eyes, and then said,

"This is very like Ben Lomond, but grander, bigger. I saw Ben Lomond when I was a boy, wandered over his great shoulders in mist and sunshine, and I have not forgotten him. This is grand and solemn, but Ben Lomond is the dearer of the two."

The Scotch accent was very strong as he said this, and then the two men were silent.

The descent of the range was made; a more difficult and perilous proceeding for the cattle than the ascent had been; the rolling arid plain was passed; so wide and vast, as compared with common spaces Ned had seen in England, that he could form no correct idea of its extent, its dreary monotony, broken here and there by low scrub, by the smoke from an occasional native encampment, by bare white stems of the gum trees that passing fires had left standing, scathed and dead; and by a spur of timber trees from the sweeps of forest.

Before crossing the Gwydyr river, the travellers overtook two drays, with a team of eight oxen apiece, and for the remainder of the journey they formed a complete caravan; this enabled McLean to ride ahead sometimes

with his young stockman, and he amused himself, in his short, dry fashion, by making him talk about himself, for he had taken a fancy to the lad, and wanted to justify his fancy to himself. There is nothing like a long, rough journey for making people understand each other, the innate kindness or selfishness is sure to discover itself, the patience and helpfulness in trifles, the ready hand and eye soon make themselves felt. Ned was not in the least officious. At home he had often been called lazy, because his aid required to be asked. In the Bush, too, he was shy of volunteering his services, but each time he had rendered them he was equal to the emergency. He managed his horse with perfect ease; he soon accustomed himself to the short stirrups necessary in the Bush, and when, after falling in with the drays, an axle was broken in crossing a rough part of the track, deep in dust and loose stones, he was carpenter enough to replace it by a young sapling. McLean silently congratulated himself on his new "hand."

At last the long and fatiguing journey was over, and they reached the last range of hills,

at the foot of which ran a river, keeping the valleys rich and green. The stream now appeared but a slender thread, joining as by chains deeper pools; but in Winter, after the rains, its whole course would be deep and rapid. The hills were covered to their summits with grass, and with rich masses of forest trees, that were even now green and pleasant to the eye. Far away to the west rolled the Condamine river, with its many windings and tributaries, and to the east might be seen the coast range of mountains.

If Ned had read of Arcadia and of Thessaly at school, and had his mind been impressed with any idea or image of those lands, he might now have used the classic names to describe the country spread out before him, as they were used by greater men than himself, many years afterwards, for such description.

The cattle were driven into the stock-yard, the horses fed and stabled, the master went to his own house, and the men to their respective huts, where their comrades and hut-keepers awaited them with a hastily-prepared meal,

anxious to listen to adventures, and to tell their own.

Ned was a new hand, and there was nothing for him to do that evening. The conversation turned upon things and people of which he was ignorant, and he had the natural shyness of a stranger, and disinclination to be felt a dead weight, and spoil sport, so he lighted his pipe and strolled out. There was light enough still to look about him, and he went at a rapid pace down to the creek, startling as he went opossums that had come out to seek their supper, and ducks that were settling and feeding on the deep pools; but the dark shadows soon fell, and he retraced his steps towards the station, rousing, as he entered the enclosure, many sleeping dogs, some of whom seemed inclined to dispute his right of admission; but the wiser collie, Laddie, who was chief and leader of the canine forces, approached and snuffed at Ned's legs, and after taking all possible precautions to avoid misplaced trust, and making all necessary observations, according to dog regulations, gave his vote of confidence in the new stockman, and rubbed his nose

against the outstretched hand, and in the most dignified manner stalked at his side during his walk round the premises, as if he were doing the honours of an introduction.

Ned strolled round the stock-yards, and the paddock, in which there were some colts, the dairy, the men's huts, and the master's house, which stood on the hill-slope, pleasantly sheltered, and with a westerly aspect; a smooth, neat walk ran outside the verandah, along the front of the house, and there was a small railed plot to serve for a garden, when the owner pleased to make one. A light was burning in the sitting-room as Ned passed, the front door was open, and the house was perfectly silent. He clambered a little way up the hill, and sat down on a crag, with Laddie at his feet. The stars were out, shining like lamps, and the stillness was very deep, save when the forest trees beyond rustled and sighed, as the light air swept over them.

It is said that a vivid and complete picture of all the events of their life passes before the minds of drowning men. There are other seasons when the same phenomenon occurs. As

Ned sat there in a foreign land, silent and alone, the whole of his past life unrolled itself before him. His spirit lived, but of his body he was unconscious; it might have been but a part of the crag on which he sat. It was a moment of pain; but the beating of Laddie's tail against his foot recalled him to ordinary life. Heavy footsteps were heard, and Laddie got up to meet some one approaching through the darkness.

"Looking about you, my lad?" said Mr. McLean's voice. "What do you think of a Bush station, eh? Anything like what you expected?"

"Not in the least, sir; but I can hardly tell what I think. The difference between the life I have left behind me and this is so great that I am at a loss for words. I am more alone, too, amongst so many entire strangers, than I could have thought possible. The dog bore me company, you see—he understands me."

"Ah! yes, Laddie—that is a good sign, and in your favour. I brought him from Scotland with me." Then, after a pause, McLean went on: "Well, do you think you shall like Aus-

tralian life?—this is to be your home for how long, my lad?"

Something in the tone of the speaker, rather than in his words, arrested Ned's attention.

"My home, and for how long?" he echoed. "I do not know—perhaps for ever." His voice sank low and mournfully.

"You'll get used to it. One always starts at first; but one gets used to many things. Take it easy, and do your duty. Come, it's time to turn in—late hours don't do here."

They walked down the hill together, smoking in silence. At his door McLean stopped a moment.

"Good night, Barton," he said kindly. "If you should ever want a word of advice, come to me."

"God bless you, sir," answered Ned, in a low voice. He went down to the huts, followed by the dog, which, though it turned once or twice, and looked after the head-master lingeringly, seemed to consider its duty was to accompany the stranger.

McLean turned into his house; the old house-keeper was in bed, and he made his usual

tumbler of grog, walking up and down the room as he drank it. Never had his house seemed so lonely to him; he shut the open books upon the table—they were cold and not sympathetic to-night; he revolved many things in his slow, cautious fashion, the drift of which might be gathered from the words he uttered, almost unconsciously, aloud:

“The boy pleases me. If he goes on well, it might be possible to have him about me—here. If he goes on well—we shall see. Heigho! I did not think an old fellow like me could feel so much alone; and I have served a long apprenticeship to it, too.”

A stockman's life is at best but a monotonous one, though to a country-bred, healthy man it is enjoyable enough in fine weather—riding across open country, with the fresh wind driving against his face, now fording a creek, now penetrating thick brush into wide forest, now scaling mountain passes—for on large “runs” the cattle may wander far, and are fond of the ranges; but still the intense isolation of the life, the long solitary days, the very small chance of anything like companionship (unless

indeed for idle or evil designs), the long fatiguing hours in the saddle, the uncertain and roughly-prepared meals, make it very irksome.

Ned found it so. He was very hard-worked, there was no doubt; and he found the reality surpass even his expectation. He had no scientific knowledge, but, as far as his time allowed, he studied the new forms of life that surrounded him with pleasure and profit. His comrades—some of them good-hearted fellows, too—were so different from himself, there was amongst them so little beyond the mere animal life—hours of work and hours of rest, that were spent in smoking, drinking, and talking, that he could find no companionship with them. They thought him a curious, crotchety fellow, rather troublesome sometimes, for they involuntarily dropped their voices, and did not tell quite their broadest stories when “the young un” was by; and men of their calibre dislike to have their “fun” disturbed. They laughed at his specimens of plants or birds, and the tales he brought home from his long rides, asking information from them about this and that, the reasons for certain facts, and the solution of his

doubts upon others. Many times they could give no answers whatever ; to their unawakened perceptions there were no mysteries or doubts ; and at other times he received but the chilling words, " Oh ! yes, they knowed that very well ; they'd seed that very often."

At first the men had been inclined to regard Ned as rather a milksop, and they called him Miss Barton amongst themselves ; but as time went on, and they found him as good a horseman as they were, cooler with the cattle, having a first-rate hand and eye at " roping " a refractory bullock, and a keen hunter after emu or kangaroo, untiring at his work, uncomplaining, and at the same time kind and thoughtful to any of them that happened to be ill, they ceased to interfere with him. On one occasion his powerful frame and strong, ready fist stood him in good stead, and showed that he would be an awkward foe. He was not at all quarrelsome, and passed by their jests and gibes with a lazy smile, but one evening some of them had returned from the township the worse for liquor, and finding Ned in the hut poring over his Shakespeare, they bullied him a good deal.

His colour came and went at some of their remarks, but he kept his temper, till one of them said, sneeringly, "that the young un didn't dare to resent things, and fight like a man. He was the master's favourite, and the master paid him well to keep quiet, and tell tales of the rest. For his part, he hated a spy worse than——"

Some speculations had been discovered by McLean himself, who was scrupulously watchful, and had been severely commented upon,—he never overlooked a fault, any more than he did a service,—and the men chose to lay the blame of telling tales upon Ned.

The sneerer was the biggest and strongest of all "the hands," and when Ned's answer to the unjust aspersion was his doubled fist, and then a stand-up fight, in which, though considerably bruised, he came off victor, the men respected him for the future.

During that first year McLean had watched the young man with interest. He showed him no greater kindness than he would have done to any of the others, but when Ned accepted the books that the master offered to lend to such as

cared to read, went on Sunday to the house, when he read aloud portions of Scripture, and prayed with his old housekeeper and her niece, and undertook to lay out as garden, and keep in order, the enclosed plot of ground round the house, McLean had it in his power to help him.

Ned often wrote letters for the men, and cast up accounts for them, some being ignorant, and others idle in such matters; but he would never take payment from them, though they urged it, and they gradually began to feel, and acknowledge, without irritation or envy, the lad's superiority to themselves. He sometimes smiled as he thought of the old days at home, when he was inferior in education and accomplishments to those about him; here such acquirements as he had were of immense advantage to him. Was this, then, his proper place? Would this be his home? In spite of everything, he could never regard his present occupation as other than temporary means to an end.

Ned was up at the house one evening, just before his second twelvemonth's hire was out, and was going through accounts. McLean

had often employed him lately to read, or write from dictation, and had given him a small addition to his wages for this service. After walking up and down the room, smoking in silence for some time, whilst Ned made his big figures at the bottom of a page, ran his eye and pen quickly up the last column, set down the sum total, took the ruler, and drew two broad black strokes at the conclusion, McLean suddenly asked,

“ Well, Barton, another year is nearly up—do you go or stay, my lad? Have you looked out for anything else? I know that you are worthy of a better place, and that there are plenty of places to be had. I should raise your wages if you stay on with me in the old capacity, but I have something to propose to you that may suit you better.”

“ No, sir, I have no wish to leave you. I know my work now, and I have been able to save out of my wages. If you are good enough to give me the full wages of men in my situation, I don't think anything will suit me better. If you like to keep me, I prefer to stop.”

“ Good—then stop. But you say you have

saved out of your wages ; I don't want to pry into your affairs, but I may be able to give you a hint as to the best investment of your savings. Remember, it is never wise, not often safe, to keep money about you in a country of lawless men like this—the temptation is too great ; and, besides, changes of residence and plans are sudden here. If you like to do so, you might buy cattle, and brand them with your initials, and they could feed with mine. I believe this to be your quickest and most lucrative plan ; it is done extensively on older stations. This would enable you to gather a considerable herd of your own, which would either sell, or soon stock a “run,” if you wish to settle. If you have no strong ties to the old country, it might be well for you to marry and settle here ; you have everything in your favour.”

“I have saved, sir, but I cannot buy cattle at present, though I thank you for the offer. I have a debt to pay. I have waited to consult you how I should send money home. May I tell you about it ?”

“Certainly—tell away.”

With some difficulty and some blushes, Ned

told the story of his billiard playing at Riverford, and his debt to Drake, and then of his letter to Rose Lester, asking her to pay it for him. McLean was so interested that he left off his restless walk, and came to sit down by the young man at the table where he had been writing, and leaned his head upon his hand.

"I feel sure," he concluded, "that Miss Lester paid this money for me, and I must repay her as soon as possible."

"Right; and how much have you to send?"

"I have saved forty pounds out of my wages, and the extra pay you were good enough to give me for gardening and carpentering."

"And you wish to send it all to this lady?"

Ned coloured—not ashamed, but shy to express his boyish impulse.

"Perhaps I ought, but I should so like to send something to my mother. Can you tell me the best way of sending to England?—and I want to send to Miss Lester without giving rise to inquiries."

"Poor fellow!" said McLean kindly, and the Scotch accent came out very strongly. "Suppose you send your mother ten pounds, and

twenty-five to the young lady?—that is, of your own. It would be a relief to you to have the whole paid, I know. Well, then, I will lend you the other twenty-five, and it will be done with. I can get it safely conveyed to her. Tell me her address, and something of her affairs; you can pay me much better than you could pay her—indeed, I can gradually repay myself by keeping back a small sum out of your wages every quarter; you will not feel the loss. Will that suit you?”

“You are very good, sir—thank you heartily.”

“Very well; we will see to that to-morrow. Now for my proposition. I am getting an older man, and I have worked hard; hitherto I have kept all the reins in my own hand, but lately I have thought of having an overseer; it would lighten my work, and enable me to get away now and then without hurrying and fretting to be back again. Don’t look so alarmed, my boy,” he proceeded, laughing at Ned’s blank face; “I don’t want an overseer for you—I want you to be overseer.”

Poor Ned was so taken aback by the sudden

change of feeling, that he narrowly escaped bursting into tears.

"I have watched you; you have been obedient and careful—I think you may try now to rule," McLean went on—"you understand the routine here. The men like you, on the whole; you are not quarrelsome. I never but once heard of your using your fists, and I don't know that you were to blame then. You best know whether you can be prudent and patient; the most attentive and the most trustworthy man on the station. The place I offer you is one of great trust, and demands self-control. You can prove whether I have done right."

Ned's heart was too full for him to dare to speak; he was but a youth, and alone in a strange land. He lifted large bright eyes to the keen, grave face, and his lips quivered as he said, in low tones,

"I am deeply grateful—I will try to deserve your trust."

"After your year is out, you will leave the huts, and come to live up here with me. You, a gentleman" (he emphasized the word, for it was one he used with discretion), "must have

suffered privations down there. I shall be glad to have you here. I have been very lonely, though, like my race, I look as if I felt nothing. I have no claim to be a gentleman. My father was in trade in Paisley, and I was doing very well with him. I married a woman that I loved, but there is much consumption in that part of Scotland. Jean was ailing, but we could not, would not think a life so precious as hers was actually threatened. At last I took fright. I consulted physicians in Glasgow and in Edinburgh; they spoke, after their manner, pleasant things; they prophesied deceit; they suggested this and that. All at once one said sea-voyages had been found beneficial in cases of delicate lungs—could I take a sea-voyage? I decided at once to try it, put together all the money I could obtain, and we sailed for Australia. Jean liked it; she was better; the sea strengthened her. We reached Australia; I got a government grant of land, and things went well with me. She was better, she was happy. A son was born to us, and he died; she said nothing, she smiled to me, but she faded, died, and I have lived a wealthy, lonely

man. These things don't do to talk of often. I draw out these memories like sacred things that have been laid by in cedar chests."

There was a long pause ; the ticking of the clock became loud and distinct, and the rustle of the forest boughs seemed to draw nearer. At last McLean said,

"I will speak to the men about this arrangement myself; I do not expect to find any jealousy or opposition there—they are quite aware your position in life is superior to their own. Let me see you to-morrow. Good night." He held out his hand to the young man.

Ned Barton might well say, as he strode down the pathway in the starlight, "Thank God!"

CHAPTER III.

MCLEAN'S proposition as to an overseer was favourably received by the men. Some among them were not at all sorry to be relieved from Ned's perpetual though silent remonstrance against their rougher doings ; in many a drunken frolic he had seemed to them a spoil-sport—they would be freed now from his protest. This consideration checked the first movements of envy at his elevation, which were not quite unnatural in their grasping ignorance, though not one of them would really have liked to live with the silent, stern-browed master.

When the two days holiday at Christmas came, McLean sent the men extra rations and grog, and they heartily drank Ned's health and wished him luck. There was a roaring feast

down at the huts, for squatters and out-station men managed to spend a few hours with their friends and acquaintances up at the head station, and on Christmas-eve there rode up to the master's house the police officer from Dalby, and two young men who had lately taken up a "run" on the opposite side of the Creek, some few miles lower down, and whom Ned had met when he was hunting stray cattle in the ranges and on the road to the township.

Hospitality is a virtue common to the Bush, and McLean, with his dogs about him, went down to the gate to meet the horsemen.

"How are you, Captain O'Hagan? You are growing quite a stranger to me. Nothing wrong with us, I hope—none of my people been in mischief this holiday time?"

"Not a bit of it, be easy on that head, Mr. McLean," replied the officer dismounting; "but ye'll allow it's not too lively in these parts, and these gentlemen were wanting an introduction to ye, so I bid them mount and come along when I was in the humour to bring them, and I knew it was feasting ye'd be just now; and guests are just the thing wanting to a feast,

here anyway, so the more the merrier, said I."

"I am glad to see you all, gentlemen," said McLean, with grave politeness, after the new settlers, Walter and George Grant, had been duly introduced to him. Then ordering the horses to be put up, he led the way into the house.

"You will stay with me to-night and to-morrow at least?" he said, "We will do our best to entertain you; there is plenty of room and a hearty welcome."

"I thought," said O'Hagan to his host later in the evening, looking across to where the three young men were sitting chatting, "that that young fellow Barton had been your stockman only? He is fine-looking, and a gentleman, if only by the gentility that comes of a good heart."

"You are right, both as to his former situation and as to his disposition. I wanted an overseer, and he suits me; he was far too good for the rougher life, only he had everything to learn, so I just let him learn it. In Scotland the learning 's the thing, no matter about the hard school."

"What a pull for you," Walter Grant was saying to Ned, "to have been made overseer! You will be almost your own master, and free to do as you please."

Ned smiled. "Hardly that," he said; "my hands will be full soon, for McLean is going to Sydney, and then I shall have the entire charge. An overseer's post is no sinecure, if, as McLean says, he really over-sees."

The brothers exchanged an amused smile, and Walter said,

"New brooms, Barton, eh? You'll change your mind, and take it easier by-and-by."

"I shall lose my place if I do," said Ned gravely. "It is all very well for you who may have money, and don't know what to do with your time, to spend it as you please, but it would not pay me."

"Never heed Walter's words," interposed George; "he was brought up for the English bar, and never made a guinea at it; he always idled about, and then he brought me out here to help him. I don't feel sure of his sticking to this; I expect he'll leave me in the lurch. We are glad to have made your acquaintance; you've

a capital seat, and can spear a kangaroo better than most people. Once or twice we wanted to speak to you when we met you up at the township, but you looked mortal proud, and would never give us a chance."

Here Christina, the housekeeper, entered with a steaming bowl of punch, which she placed beside her master.

"Stay where you are, Christie," he said, "and take your glass with us. For auld lang syne, gentlemen, let us drink to all dear to us—the absent and the dead."

Each man drank the toast in silence, and with bent head. In this far land, all of them more or less alone, it was like a sacred rite.

"Here's health and long life, maister," said Christie. "I ha'e nae freend on airth but yersel', and I drink to the leevin'. I'm no sae sure that the Lord wad ha'e us drink to the deid, but I hae nae occasion to't. My respects to ye a', gentlemen."

"Christie must always have her say," said McLean, after she had left the room. "She's a faithful woman, and I do not care to interrupt or forbid her. Sing, you young men, if you can."

We represent the three kingdoms. A song for lang syne and the auld countree."

And O'Hagan, like a bold Irishman as he was, first in the field, lifted up his voice and sang, "Let Erin remember the days of old," in a rich baritone. Walter Grant followed with "The flag that braved a thousand years the battle and the breeze," and to his tenor his brother George supplied some bass notes that greatly improved the effect of the song.

There was a moment's pause, and McLean nodded to Ned.

"Come, Barton, the echoes wait for you. I have no idea whether you can sing or not, though."

The colour came into Ned's cheek, and his blue eyes looked straight into his master's, almost seeming to draw inspiration thence; and then he sang, if with no great skill, with infinite feeling, the mournful "Flowers o' the Forest." McLean had turned away his head, for he knew his eyes were moist, and there were signs of trouble in his face; the others kept a sympathetic silence, fearing to intrude upon the stern, grey man. Presently he laid his

hand on Ned's shoulder, and a rare smile was on his lips.

"Thank you for your song, my lad; it minded me of past times. But it was a Scotch one. You, an Englishman, I thought you would have sung an English song. You have ended the tale, and left me out. I'm the Scot, you know."

"Really, sir," said Ned, apologetically, "I did not think of that. My mother used to sing that song, and I liked it, that was all. I am sorry I usurped your place."

"No offence, my lad. I took it as a compliment, and it touched me very nearly. You saved me trouble, that's all."

"Whisht, lassie!—can ye no whisht?" cried Christie, in the kitchen, to her niece, busy with pots and pans, and a tub of hot water, after the dinner. "Div ye no like a sang? It's lang sin' there was singing i' the maister's hoose. Gang, noo, Leezie, and ope the parlour door a wee, wee bittie. I maun hear thae sangs. I hae heerd nae sang sin' mistress deid."

The singing pleased the woman mightily, and she crept close behind the parlour door in

the passage, leaning there, and beating her hands softly together in time.

"Them's the twa brithers noo," she whispered. "'Tis a gran' sang yon. The flag abune the battle. No but that I like the sang o' Malachi, wi' the chain o' gowd, tae! Eh, but!—eh, but!" she went on, in a tremble of agitation, "wha's singin' the noo? Young Barton, the owerseer. Gude save us! that sang! It gars me greet!"

And back into the kitchen she went, and sat down on her creepie within the door, her apron thrown over her head, and rocked herself to and fro.

"Ye niver heerd thae sangs in th' auld coun-tree," she said to the girl. "Ye dinna ken hoo thae stir yer heart. He's a gude lad is Mr. Barton, and the maister is set on him, but noo he'll wile the heart oot o' him. Eh, Leezie, woman, but ye canna tell what 'tis to hear the auld sangs in a strange lan'. Ye ken the Jews wadna sing their hame sangs in the strange lan'."

The gentlemen smoked in the verandah. The night was warm and still, the stars large and bright, looking, as they so often do in Australia, as if they hung nearer the earth—though not so

large in reality as those of the northern hemisphere, the peculiarity of the clear atmosphere giving the apparent size—and there was a crescent moon. There was a low murmur of leaves from the forest, the faint lowing of cattle was heard, and now and then a firefly brushed past. The air was sweet with the jessamine twined about the verandah posts.

It was Midsummer, not Christmas, here, and they talked of the far different scenes at home, telling tales of the prowess or kindness of those dear to them across the ocean. All but McLean; he had made his home in the new land, and stood alone in it. Bravely had he borne the desolation that had come upon him, quietly and unshrinkingly he had remained at his solitary post. But the human heart desires companionship, and Ned presented this to him. It was only the oasis in the desert, not the haven of perfect rest; but the cold-mannered, iron-grey man accepted it with joy, and, as Christie said, "his heart was set upon" the young man.

They talked and sang, mournful or sentimental songs; their train of thought was not merry, and the hut-men, in the midst of their boisterous

feasting, heard the sweeter singing from their master's house, and listened in surprise. Just as the Christmas dawn was breaking they sang "Auld Lang Syne," McLean's deep voice supplying a bass, like the pedals of an organ; and then they parted for the night, with mutual good wishes.

"The maister's singin'!—niver has he sung sin' the mistress dee'd. Lord save us! he's no fey the nicht!" ejaculated Christie; for she was no less superstitious than the rest of her country people, though perhaps she called it spiritual-minded.

The whole of Christmas day was spent up in the eastward ranges; the air was very much cooler on the mountains than on the plains, where the thermometer was standing at 100°. They went up to the source of the river, a tributary of the Condamine, and saw the bright clear water issue from the springs, about which grew plants of European kinds, gather force and volume, shaded by red cedars and box-trees, and then throwing itself over masses of rocks, form a beautiful waterfall, that after the rains would be of considerable size, and tumble into

a ravine, thickly set with blue gums and grass trees, before it found its way out into the plain.

At dinner Christina served a fine wild turkey and a plum-pudding, to the applause of the young men, who voted old Christie the model of Bush cooks.

Next day McLean's guests left the station, the better for the holiday and companionship; and the "hands" betook themselves to their work, with no more casualties than a few headaches, and a black eye or two, in consequence of unusual potations.

In view of his proposed journey to Sydney, to visit Mr. Dawson on special business, and some weeks' absence there, McLean gave his overseer all directions for the care of sheep and cattle, and rode with him to the outlying stations; but on the receipt of a letter from Mr. Dawson, saying it was his intention to come by sea to Brisbane, and would prefer to meet his friend there, McLean said,

"I was only going to Sydney, on Dawson's account; it will suit me far better to meet him at Brisbane. I shall like to see the place again; the last time I was there it was

struggling up into existence ; six months makes a great difference in our new towns. Dawson's business is really at Warwick, where he intends to open a branch store in connection with his stores and agency in Sydney, and he wants to place an agent there at once. By-the-by, he may come here for a few days ; he can travel without much fatigue, the roads are so improved, but it is hardly likely. However, suppose you see to that extra room being put to rights, cleaned and boarded where it requires it, you can send a man over to the township, or to Dalby, for anything you want. Send Long Sam with the cart for wall-paper, and a little tidy furniture ; you can depend on him, and he has eyes in his head. I had rather you did not go yourself."

Ned had no trouble with the men in his charge, for they felt he was both kind and just to them. They lent themselves now to his wishes, and the work, both out and in-doors, went on satisfactorily. He did not go to Warwick himself, but one of the Grants happening to ride over and spend the night with him, he got him to order some crockery in the

township, not liking the common, coarse-looking ware that had pleased Long Sam.

"What a pity," thought Ned, when the basket of articles ordered by Grant arrived, "that these pretty things, with dainty flowers on them, should be used by us men only. Fancy Grant, who has lived here longer than I have, going in for such things! I'm afraid I should have chosen plain grey or drab. Taste, I suppose."

He thought it worth while to recommend the new purchases to Christie's especial consideration.

"Hech, sirs!" she cried with uplifted hands, "wha'd hae thocht o' sic things in these far awa' pairts! Eh! Mr. Barton, but what'll the maister say to sic vagaries?" Then turning a pretty cup in her hand, "just fit for a lassie's bit fingers."

Ned laughed, and told her that pretty things were better than ugly ones, and did not break any faster.

"I'm no sayin' onything agin them, but ye ken they're no just what the maister wad hae seleckit."

Ned rode home slowly one evening, cogitating a letter that he intended to write, in answer to one of his sisters. She had reproached him with his long silence, and his very scanty information, when he did vouchsafe to write; and she also remarked upon the grave, even sad, tone of his letters, saying that she thought he had lost all his cheerfulness and good spirits out in the Bush.

"I shall tell her," he thought, letting the reins hang loose on his horse's neck, "that life here is not all beer and skittles—that one has plenty to do, though there is not much to talk about, and that it must be done with all one's might, too. I don't think there's anything the matter with my spirits, but getting one's bread is serious work, and in such hot weather, too. Really, to be jolly now under such a temperature would be too much to expect of anyone but a Tapley. Besides, the girls forget I am living with a grave and cautious Scot. One takes one's tone insensibly—at least, I do, I'm afraid—from the people one is with. I wonder when McLean will get home, by-the-by? He is the best and kindest fellow, though he is

rough outside. What a friend he is to me! How my mother would like him! How easily I might have dropped away into being a good-for-nothing scamp! And what a ride I have had to-day!—what a glorious country! I wonder if any of my people would like to come out here?”

So thinking, he rode into the yard, nodded to one or two men who were lounging, smoking, or drinking their tea, that never-failing beverage in Australia. One of them ran forward to help Ned to unsaddle, and turn out his horse, and he stopped chatting to him a little while; the understanding between him and the men was very good now. He had called, as he entered the verandah, for some food to be served him, and was going to his room to wash and dress; but seeing a letter, he hastily opened and glanced through it. It was from McLean.

“Good heavens! they’ll be here to-night!” he cried.

Out he rushed into the kitchen, calling to Christina.

“Hoot, toots! Mr. Barton, what’s wrang wi’ ye? Ha’e ye lost yer wuts? Ye’re no starvin’;

ye'll get yer denner jist noo. Gang awa', like a gude mon; ye maunna be clishmaclaverin' here—it aye hinders a body," answered Christina, running to and fro all the time, putting plates, and knives, and glasses into a tray, and taking a peep now and then at a savoury stew on the fire. "What for are ye no gaun, lauchin' and stannin' there? Gang yer ways—ye'll get nae denner else."

"But it's not my dinner I want, Christie. If you'll stand still a minute, I'll tell you." But Christie thought he was only up to his tricks, and would not mind him, but went bustling over her business, till Ned, who had followed her up and down, at last hunted her into a corner, where she stood staring at him with her hands spread on her knees; and then, holding the letter close to her face, he said, in little short sentences, which she interrupted with every conceivable ejaculation,

"The master's coming home—to-night. Here is his letter. It ought to have come two days ago. Mr. Dawson is with him—coming to stay—and Miss Dawson is coming too."

"Gude save us! Hear till him!" etc., etc.,

prettiest little smile, dropped her eyelids over her bright eyes, and let the thick dark lashes sweep her cheeks, laid a small hand on his shoulder, and sprang to the ground.

The young man was charmed. She was a fairy queen, she was adorable, and she was here!

CHAPTER IV.

NED had become attached to his new home ; till this evening he had, however, scarcely realised the fact that it was very lonely, and though comfortable and suitable, that it had no charm, no sweetness ; he wondered that he had never seen and remarked upon this before. It was the old story of Adam in Paradise—Eve was wanting. Ned's thoughts rarely took distinct shapes, but this was much their complexion.

But there was both charm and sweetness in the lodge in the wilderness to-night. Before Zara Dawson had been in the house an hour she had made her presence felt. The soft rustle of her clothes, the pale pink of her muslin

dress, the flutter of her ribbons, the faint scent of violets that surrounded her, all seemed to have been expected there. The sofa against the wall, on which McLean had never sat, the low rocking-chair that Ned had brought out of the treasures of an unused room, into which Zara sank at once, seemed as if they had waited but for her; and the pretty cups and saucers, which had astonished Christie's more commonplace ideas, were here ready for the dainty fingers that moved so deftly amongst them.

The room in which McLean habitually sat, and which was used for all purposes, Ned had converted, by dint of altering the position of the furniture, and arranging bouquets of flowers, and candlesticks, into a very fair resemblance to a lady's sitting-room; and the room on the other side of the entrance—which had been called “the business-room,” and was never used as such by any chance, but was littered with papers and old books, stock whips, guns, and boots—he had cleared, and set Leezie and one of the boys to clean and sweep; and by the time the guests were ready Christie had prepared and spread there a very creditable meal.

Thenceforward it was dignified by the name of dining-room.

"You really have a wonderful genius, Barton," said McLean, much gratified at the new arrangements, "or you have had an enchanter's wand at your call; and in such a short time to do so much! I declare I shouldn't have known my own house if I had walked in in the dark! I have been making all sorts of excuses to Miss Dawson for its want of grace and comfort——"

"And I come and find it charming," the young lady interrupted. "My little room is so pretty!—is that all new? There is such pretty china in it, and flowers, and books."

"Well, yes, it is new; for I gave Mr. Barton directions before I left to have an extra bedroom prepared, thinking your father might return; but I did not expect you, my dear, and he only got my letter to say you were coming two hours ago."

"And Barton got pretty china for me?" laughed Mr. Dawson.

"I did all that has been done, certainly," said Ned, with a blush, "except the china. A friend

of mine got that—Walter Grant,” he added, looking at McLean. “I did not like what Sam brought, and Grant volunteered to order some.”

“Ah! I was going to ask you how you amused yourself.”

“I should have been very lonely, sir, without you, but I saw the Grants very often.”

“That is right. But Walter does the visiting, does he? George stays to mind his work.”

After dinner the two elders walked up and down the verandah, and Zara, who said she was tired, sat in the low rocking-chair, and looked out upon the garden and valley. Ned stood just within the room, leaning against the window-frame, playing with a tame cockatoo, and watching almost unconsciously the silent girl.

“What a pretty bird!” she said at last. “Will it let me touch it?”

He set it on her hand.

“I think it is quite tame. I caught it myself. I never saw one like it in England; there we have the yellow-crested ones.”

"Are you fond of birds? Do you know much about them? Yes, I remember Mr. McLean told us you were quite a naturalist, and wrote descriptions of the new animals you see. Are they very different from English ones? Tell me about England," she said, with sudden animation, sitting upright.

"What about England? There are so many things to say; I might tell you things that I like there, and that you might not care for."

"Oh! you think I might not like the things that you do?" she asked, with a little smile playing in her eyes. "Am I too stupid, or do you despise us Australians?"

"I don't understand," he stammered, not quite sure if she were quizzing him, and feeling the brilliance of her eyes. "I thought you might find me stupid, and my information about England very uninteresting. But I will tell you all I can."

He sat down, and she asked him little questions, to which he gave long answers; and he studied the rise and fall of her bosom under the soft, transparent folds of her dress, the shape of

her idly folded hands, the curve of her eyelids, and the soft grey shadow thrown on her cheek by the thick eyelashes ; and she listened complacently, without disturbing herself at all, to the more and more eager and eloquent tones of the handsome youth.

“Don’t you smoke ?” she asked, after some silence, she having exhausted her English questions ; “because you must not stay here with me. Go to the others.”

“I will go if you wish it ; but I do not care to smoke to-night.”

She lifted her dark eyes to him, with an expression of interest.

“Do you like being here ?” she said. “Do you like Mr. McLean ?”

“So much !—he has been so good to me ; I like Australia very much—more than ever now,” he added, in a low tone.

“Shall you live here all your life ?” not appearing to notice his last words. “But of course not. You will go back to England. I hope you will make a fortune ; many people do.”

"Thank you. But my return to England will depend on many things."

"I enjoyed my voyage to Brisbane so much," she said, presently, "and the journey here was beautiful. How grand the country is! Not all of it, of course—some is like a desert; but from Warwick here it is so pretty, and Mr. McLean was more kind and attentive than even papa. I did not think a square-headed Scotchman, with great riding-boots, could be so gentle. In Sydney I have heard quite gentlemen, handsome and well-dressed, say dreadful things, and they did not always behave prettily, either."

"In England," said Ned, gravely and proudly, "gentlemen"—and he laid a stress upon the word—"always behave and speak properly." He might have added: "And in all the world over," for the difference is in the definition of the word.

She was not offended—rather pleased that the English ideal she had formed was so noble a one.

"Papa brought me with him," she went on, "because I have not been well; I found Sydney very hot and trying this year. The doctor said

I had been out too much, and was overdone; but one must go out, you know—at least, there. They thought the change up here would do me good. Mr. McLean did not seem to dislike my coming, but I am afraid it will have given him and you a great deal of trouble. Do you mind?”

“Why do you say such things? Mind! We are both very glad! Only the place is so rough—not good enough for you. And perhaps you will be dull. There is no society here—you will get tired.”

“Is it dull? You must take me out to ride, and show me your curiosities, and let me read all your books written about the animals, and tell me about things. But I heard you tell Mr. McLean that you had not been dull, because the Grants had been to see you. Who are the Grants? Are they English?”

Her father and McLean came in out of the darkness, and she rose and wished them good night, paying a little compliment to McLean for his hospitality and kindness, which he received with evident pleasure, and bowed over her hand

with grave, old-fashioned politeness. She hung a minute about her father's neck.

"I am not very tired, papa," she whispered, loud enough to be heard, "and I like being here very much. I am quite happy."

Ned's heart swelled to the implied compliment, and his frame thrilled to the touch of her hand, and the shy look of her soft eyes.

"She's a good girl, on the whole, McLean," said her father, when she was gone, "and affectionate, but she's wayward—wayward. She's got no mother, poor thing! and she's fond of gaiety, and I don't know how to cross her, what with business, and one thing and another."

When Mr. Dawson asked Ned what plans he had formed for the future, he smiled, and said that he was very little given to forming plans; he feared he was not a man of business at all, not ambitious, and that if McLean cared to keep him, he saw no reason against his remaining where he was.

McLean prudently said nothing, but he had looked a long way ahead, and thought that if this lad proved himself worthy, and his personal regard for himself increased, he would gladly

take the responsibility of providing for his future. For a moment Mr. Dawson thought the companionship of this handsome but very unambitious and poor young man might be highly detrimental to his daughter's prospects ; but he dismissed the thought, by considering that she had hitherto shown herself quite alive to the necessities of wealth and a good position, so he turned into bed, and slept comfortably, reflecting that he could return to Sydney as soon as he pleased.

McLean had a long confidential talk over the affairs of the station with Ned, and with his arm thrown across the young man's shoulder, discussed with him some farming plans, pleased to find Ned more apt, and more interested than usual. Ned's dreams that night were vague ones, but they were rose-tinted.

A light, cool wind had risen after midnight, and refreshed the air, and in the early morning, when Ned rose, and went to the paddock for his horse, everything seemed to greet him with a new beauty. He rode out to one of the sheep stations, singing as he went, gave some orders, heard some complaints, went down to the Creek

to bathe, and rode slowly home to breakfast. His coat hung across his saddle, and he wore only a blue and white striped shirt, with a little black neckerchief loosely tied at his throat. Zara stood outside the verandah, shading her eyes with her hand from the sun, and watching him. He struck his heel against his horse's flank when he saw her, making the animal start and bound with him, and then he waved his broad-leaved hat to her as he galloped forward.

"What a long time you have made us wait breakfast!" she said, as he sprang off his horse, coo-eed for a lad to take him, and gained her side. "Why did you go out first? I wanted to go too. You don't suppose people can sleep in strange houses, and hear other people moving about at unearthly hours, without fancying that there are at least thieves in the house? But," seeing he looked vexed, "do you always go out so early?—I have only been waiting half an hour. I did get up when you went out, and I peeped at you running down to the yards there; but it was so very early, and I was tired, so I went to bed again. But

another day you will take me with you—perhaps?”

“If you are good,” he answered, laughing, but with a rising tenderness in his blue eyes that she was not slow to mark.

“I wonder what you would call good?” she asked, turning away with a little toss of her head, pretending to be offended, that she might not seem to have observed the expression of his face. “But breakfast is ready. The really good person just now is your housekeeper, because I am hungry, and I suppose you are. But will you take me out to ride after breakfast?”

“It will be too hot; but later in the day, if Mr. McLean does not want me, I shall be only too happy. But we must see about a horse that will carry you.”

“Oh! I am not afraid.”

“I never supposed you were,”—with a certain tone of admiration and pride in his voice.

Zara found the Bush breakfast very satisfactory, and was especially delighted with Christie's hot girdle cakes. McLean and Mr. Dawson talked business prospects and politics of

the Colony, and proposed to make an excursion in a day or two to some tallow-works at some distance; and then McLean said,

“What are you wishing to do to-day, Miss Dawson? Barton, you had better see about a horse; the side-saddle came over last night; take the chestnut and try him round the paddocks. You know, my dear, Barton and I must work part of the day, but we shall enjoy our recreation all the more when we get it. We shall have to leave you to yourself sometimes, and you must not be weary.”

“I shall go to Mrs. Christie, and get her to teach me how to make cakes and butter,” laughed Zara. “I may as well acquire useful knowledge, now I have done with ornamental school-work.”

For a day or two Zara sat under the verandah in the rocking-chair, doing some pretty needle-work, and watching Ned in his blue-striped shirt, with a light horse-cloth round his legs, breaking the chestnut in the paddocks; late in the afternoon they wandered up the range amongst the rocks and scrub.

There is nothing so conducive to intimacy as

the every-day companionship of persons in a wild country, and a rough, homely, uneventful life. They are thrown so entirely upon each other for ideas—for the ordinary services rendered by human beings to one another—that every point of sympathy or relationship is soon discovered and improved upon; all the latent goodness and kindness of the heart is evoked. Be it well understood that this applies to civilized people, and that it involves no question of irrevocable bonds; for the more brutal the savage, the more solitary he lives, and the moment there comes the pressure of the chain of custom or of law, as in the case of uncongenial parents and children, or uncongenial husbands and wives, then the life of intimacy becomes a dreary and a terrible thing.

Zara was happy at the Creek. Her father was glad to see her look fresh and well. McLean, in his stiff, awkward fashion, was gladdened by her presence. Leezie thought her the beautifullest young lady in the world; even Christina, in a doubtful kind of way, and with frequent relapses into distance and distrust, was cheered and charmed by her grace

and kindness. The very "hands" about the place smiled and brightened when she approached, and of Ned's pleasure there is little need to speak. There was but one dissentient creature at the station—Laddie never noticed her, nor would he accept caresses at her hands.

Laddie had followed Ned up to the house, and slept every night outside his door, no one having the heart to turn away the faithful creature. He had gone about the station, had taken his duty with the other dogs in herding cattle or sheep, as he was required, but he had never hitherto distinguished with an especial regard any of his employers. To Ned he attached himself at once, from the curious latent sympathy that appears to affect men and dogs, and he now yielded willing obedience to none but him. Let the shepherds or stockmen whistle as they would—let him hear the full chorus of the whole tribe of dogs on the farm—Laddie never stirred if Ned's voice or lifted hand did not give the signal.

The night Zara Dawson came, no one had paid any heed to Laddie's expression of opinion, but he formed an opinion nevertheless. He

wrinkled up his sensitive nose, and showed just the edges of his sharp white teeth pressed firmly together, then he retreated under Ned's chair, where, with his nose between his paws, he kept his kind dark eyes fixed watchfully on his master, and indulged himself often with a wrinkling of the nostrils, and low muttered growls as a relief to his feelings. As the days went on, he never went near Zara—he would keep on the other side of Ned, if she walked with him; once or twice she tried to coax him, but he never listened to her; when Ned sent him, he went, with a kind of protest in his eyes, and with the frill about his neck set up in stern pride. It annoyed Ned at first, and rather wounded Zara's vanity, but she concealed her feelings on the subject by saying she did not care much for dogs; to which McLean had rejoined, "That, of course, will account for Laddie's want of appreciation of you. Dogs are very wise."

The rainy days set in, deluging the country. McLean and Ned had still their work to do; they sat in the dining-room over accounts, or went about the farm and down to the various

stations. Stock must be bought and sold; "mobs" of cattle herded into proper shelter, strayed beasts sought for, and sheep carefully looked over, and their pasture changed—there is a never ending routine of work to be done on a Bush farm.

Mr. Dawson went over to Warwick and superintended some building operations in which he was concerned; and Zara, left under Christina's special charge, betook herself to household matters. She put off the pretty gay city clothing and its costly adornments, and donned plain serviceable garments suitable to her present occupations. This entire change of manners and life amused her, and her naturally kind disposition found its delight in giving pleasure to others. It was not so much the love of admiration as of approbation that governed her, for she was as gratified at McLean's and Christina's praise as ever she had been by the most considered of her Sydney friends, and in every way she strove to win from those who now surrounded her expressions of regard and appreciation, and she dearly liked to make herself useful and necessary to them. So strong had the habit of

intimacy become, and the sense of mutual dependence, that none of the little party at the station were conscious of it, except Zara. She certainly, from her greater self-consciousness, her time not occupied by compulsory duties, and the fact that she weighed the effect of almost all she said, was perfectly aware of the power and influence she had acquired. A quiet harmony reigned at the station.

The rainy season passed into Winter, the four most delicious months in Queensland, and those which Mr. Dawson had been recommended to allow his daughter to spend in that district.

Early in May, Ned went away for some days on business for McLean. Zara missed him greatly, though she said nothing, but she was very restless with no one to talk to, no one to play at draughts with, though McLean did all in his power to amuse her. She was half annoyed with herself for missing him so much ; it was all very well for him to care for her, but she was not sure she wanted to care for him in return.

The only guest that had visited the station was O'Hagan, and Zara was not certain that

she liked him. He watched her closely, and there was an odd, ironical, upward curve in his eyebrows that puzzled her, and a keen expression in his grey eyes, that reminded her of Laddie; and yet she could not but acknowledge his easy flow of talk, his quick wit, and his great courtesy. But O'Hagan's visits did not disturb her in the least, and Ned's absence disturbed her very much. When he was expected home, she fretted Christina excessively by wanting some fresh occupation; all day long she was in and out of the kitchen; she lent her hand to every preparation for the evening meal; she sat down to read, turning over a large package of books her father had bought on his last visit to Warwick; and she opened the piano that had been sent for to Brisbane for her—but nothing pleased her. She went to the huts to inquire for McLean, but he was far away on the "runs;" her father was busy in the dining-room over the latest Sydney Gazette, money articles, and mercantile intelligence. He only gave her a smile and a nod when she looked in; and she retired, lamenting her hard fate in having so prosy and business-ridden a parent. Then she sat down

in the rocking-chair, pulling it close to the window, that she might see where the track wound up from the river, and soothed herself with that resource for many women's troubles—her needle, working steadily and fast at a dress she was making, for she had a fit of usefulness on her.

McLean came up from the pastures, and dinner was served. In Australia no one ever waits for travellers: in their huts men leave for the absent ones the jerked beef and damper and the pot of tea beside the fire.

Quite late in the evening Ned came home. The two gentlemen were playing backgammon, and not thinking about the young fellow; but Zara heard his horse's feet. By this time she was vexed at his delay, and began to consider herself aggrieved, so that when he entered the room, with face all aglow, and bright eyes, and smiled all round, expecting to meet with answering smiles, she looked up with a little well-feigned surprise, from a book in which she seemed to be deeply immersed, and to which she at once returned after having shaken hands with him. He was pained, but hoped soon to have

the opportunity of sitting beside her, and drawing all her attention to himself; in the meantime he must answer McLean's questions.

"You will want dinner, or rather supper, Barton. You must be starving if you made that last day's journey without a halt? We expected you long ago, but I would not wait. What is the news abroad?"

"Well, sir, I happened to meet Walter Grant down at the Creek, and he would take no refusal; I was obliged to turn in with him, and dine there. They have a nice little 'run,' and seem to be doing well. I fancy it is in the main, thanks to George."

"So I believe. Quite right to go there. The lads have not been over for a long time. I met them in Dalby one day."

"They had heard from some of your people that you had company, and, unlike Bush manners, they stayed away till the company was gone. Walter is heart and soul an Englishman. But there was a more serious reason for their not coming over. Some wandering tribe of natives has been making depredations upon their farm, and they were obliged to have re-

course to O'Hagan's troopers to drive them off. They made short work of the blacks ; some were wounded or killed, but their friend scarried them away, and have gone off into the desert. Grant's people think they were a tribe who came down upon the station last year—to beg, not to steal ; Walter would have nothing to say to them, and unluckily finding one of their dogs carrying away some kangaroo meat, he shot it. They made a frightful lamentation about it, vowing vengeance. This raid is supposed to have been the result."

"I am sorry," said McLean gravely, "that Grant should have killed one of their dogs ; they are passionately fond of their animals, and rarely forgive such an injury. We have not been troubled by any marauding parties since I have been here, three years now. Christina has orders to relieve their wants, as far as she can, when they beg. There are a few friendly tribes settled along the river to the southward ; they work for us occasionally, and are capital messengers, swift and untiring. Walter Grant is a good fellow, but a thorough Englishman, as Barton says, and has no idea of suffering any intrusion

upon his rights; but one must suit oneself a little to the circumstances in which one is. But he is a great favourite of yours." Then he added with a smile, "Don't be in a hurry to make friends, Barton; take Scotch advice—be prudent. Not that I dislike Walter, but I always fear hasty friendships."

"I do like him, certainly," answered Ned, colouring a little, "and I am afraid I am apt to be in a hurry. But the Grants spoke of coming over to-morrow, or next day. I told them you would not wish them to stay away because you had friends here. I am sure they would like to come," with the least look at Zara, "and Miss Dawson likes Englishmen."

McLean smiled, "Doubtless they would like to come, and you will not dislike it, my dear?" To Zara, "We will have some music when they are here. You like Englishmen."

"Sometimes," said Zara, carelessly, and she slowly lifted her beautiful dark eyes, and let them fall on Ned's face exactly as if she did not see him.

He was hurt at her seeming neglect and cool-

ness, having pictured a very different reception ; and leaving the room on pretence of making some change in his dress, he thought how he should conduct himself to bring back her sunshine—for he was not of the temperament that gives back scorn for scorn.

She saw by his pained look and heightened colour that she had made him feel her power, and she was content for the present ; now she would soothe his wounded pride, and draw him yet nearer to her. She did not express it thus, but said in her heart, Poor boy, there is no need to vex him when I can make him happy ! He is very nice and kind, and I really like him ; he is so handsome, though he was only a stockman.

She asked him for some trifle on his return to the room ; inquired, in low tones, if he was not tired with his journey, saying how much they all had missed him.

Did that "all" include herself? he thought. He hoped it might, but he was too modest to make the direct inquiry. For the first time he talked to her about his home and his mother, and incidentally mentioned Rose Lester's name. Something in the name attracted Zara's

ear, or the strange instinct of sympathy or antipathy influenced her. When she was out riding with Ned the next day she asked him to describe that English girl to her; he knew that she was studying him when he replied, and he wondered if it was possible she could be jealous of that memory—for a memory Rose was to him, a memory as of some fair domain belonging to another, at which we gaze with swelling heart, knowing it is not for us; a memory as of some shining stream, with overshadowing trees, and cool, rippling waters, past which we are borne rapidly, though our soul would rest there!

He had thought of Rose much during his late absence from the station; she was shrined in his inmost heart, but, like many another worshipper, he sealed the shrine, and visited it but rarely, as though he feared to injure or detract from its sacredness and purity by too frequent or too close acquaintance. Alas! that only is the perfect and soul-saving ideal with which we put ourselves in close and unbroken communion.

Ned had compared these two women in his

heart; but Rose was far away—unapproachable, he said, a “bright, particular star,” out of his reach. Zara was near, within his grasp—a flower that might perhaps be plucked.

Zara was very charming to him next day,—the more so from the coolness of last night; he sunned himself in her presence, every word and look of kindness drew him nearer to her, and made him tremble with hope.

They were riding through some open forest towards the river, and Ned dismounted to pick some everlasting of different colours that enamelled the grass under the trees. He was leaning against his horse’s shoulder, with the bridle slung on his arm, binding the flowers with a stalk of long grass, and chatting to Zara, who, bending down to him, was laughing merrily, when Walter Grant rode up, a valise strapped on his saddle. After the introduction was over, Walter said,

“You have no idea what a pretty picture you made as I rode up! I was watching you. Let me go down to the river with you. I am coming to the station for a day or two. George will be up in time for dinner. We are both

nearly savages, Miss Dawson, but you will make allowances for us, and a few days of your sweet influence may improve us."

CHAPTER V.

McLEAN welcomed his young guests cordially, and Zara made Ned feel very proud and happy at being distinguished by her marked regard before his friends.

"Could you not give us some tunes, Zara? Go and play the piano," Mr. Dawson said, in the evening.

Zara was by no means a good musician, and she could not sing. McLean looked at Walter, who was lounging on the sofa with a book, and watching all that was going on.

"Go and sing, man. Make him sing, Miss Dawson."

Walter strolled across the room, and sat down by Zara.

"You will play for me?" he said. "What

shall I sing? Have you any duets, or shall I sing alone? Do you like music?"

"Yes; but I was idle at school. I am sure I cannot accompany you."

"How pretty she is!" he thought, and, still looking in her face, began to sing very softly, as if singing to her alone. From one love-song to another his voice floated, now louder, now softly sighing, like a distant wind, in the wonderful singing that sways the heart. Zara's eyes were full of tears, but she tried to smile and hide them.

"Did you like that?" he asked, bending towards her.

"I never heard such singing before," she replied, in the same low tone in which he spoke. "Do all Englishmen sing? Mr. Barton sings, but not like that."

"Very pretty songs," interrupted McLean's strong voice; "but make him sing you a patriotic song, my dear, he's grand at them."

"Do sing," pleaded the sweet voice. "Do sing," asked the soft eyes. He looked away from the dark eyes, and intently at the wall before him.

Memory asserted her sway, and the grand voice poured out the grander lines, "Friend of the brave." The others laid down their cards to listen, and unconsciously every eye fired, every hand closed as Walter sang "And hears thy stormy music in the drum."

"That's just inspiration!" cried McLean, with a strong Scotch accent. "Men would fight to the death for such a singer."

Walter smiled, but the smile fell upon Zara's pale upturned face.

"That will do for to-night," he said; "anything more would be tame and poor."

Zara sat a little apart, out of the light, and spoke to Ned no more that evening.

"Miss Dawson is very charming—quite a rose in the wilderness. Is she well off?" Walter said carelessly, when alone with Ned, throwing back his head, and puffing the smoke from his nostrils. "Does her father mean her to marry old McLean? He is very attentive."

"McLean!" echoed Ned—"I never thought of that."

Walter Grant laughed.

"It would not be a bad match; though it is a pity

to see a beautiful young girl sacrificed to an old man."

Ned went to bed, but thought so much that he could not sleep. He rose earlier than usual, and went to his business about the farm. On his return, he found Zara sitting in the rocking-chair beside the piano, upon which Walter Grant was playing softly some of Strauss' waltzes, and speaking, with his head bent low. The affection that had been growing day by day in Ned's heart suddenly attained its height, and in the rush of passionate jealousy that filled him he knew that he loved this girl. He commanded himself sufficiently, however, to make the ordinary salutation to both, and Walter said, with a smile,

"We were just talking of you, old fellow—how hard-working and conscientious you are. No wonder McLean thinks so much of you. Here have I been idling with Miss Dawson, and you have been at work."

Zara frowned slightly. Was this man only "idling" when he talked to her? The coolness of the speech caused a curious revulsion in Ned's feelings; he wondered if his face had

expressed annoyance, and thought Grant must think him a fool. Zara rose, and went in to breakfast, and the young men followed her, Walter linking his arm through Ned's. McLean wished the young lady good morning, and paid her one of his quaint compliments. Walter pressed Ned's arm, and whispered, "What did I tell you last night?"

"Barton," cried George Grant, "I meant to have gone with you on your rounds this morning; you might have given a fellow a call, when you passed his door."

"Mr. Walter will hardly find the Bush agree with him, I fear," said McLean, shaking his head; "he was tinkling away at the piano the first thing this morning."

Walter smiled, and shrugged his shoulders; but George said,

"And yet no one can work like Walter; he can do everything he sets his mind to do."

Zara only heeded the words "tinkling at the piano," and remembered Walter's own expression, "idling here," and her vanity was wounded; so, when they went out for their emu-hunting, she kept close at Ned's side all day,

though her dark eyes wandered often to Walter's face.

After a good day's sport, they spent a merry evening. Walter and George sang their jolliest songs; O'Hagan, who had ridden over, outdid himself in fun and drollery; he was in the maddest spirits. Alone with his host over a steaming glass of whiskey-punch, he said suddenly:

"What are you about, McLean?—are ye blind to what is going on under your eyes? What a temptation you are keeping before these lads!"

McLean looked up in astonishment, with his spoon suspended over his tumbler.

"I mean about Miss Dawson—a pretty girl; but, faith, she's the veriest flirt that ever trod shoe-leather! You'll have assault and murder, divil a doubt, and send for the police in a hurry. She'll have those boys by the ears in no time. Your lad Barton means to have a try for her, I know, and thinks he has first right; but I am not sure what the young lady's notions are, and Walter Grant will dispute Barton's claim. You look wonderfully surprised," he said, clapping McLean on the back,

"but, by Jove! ye'll see I'm right. You're a clever fellow, but you'll not match an Irishman for this sort of work. I just give you a sight of the game."

"I never dreamed of this," said McLean, stirring his punch meditatively; "but it would be no bad thing for Barton. She could not have a better, more honest-hearted fellow. He has not a shilling, of course; but I—well, I've no children, few near relatives—and she will have money, doubtless. I don't know, though, if her father would give her to Barton; rich men are difficult to manage. But she is a pretty, handy lassie, and I would make her welcome; it's better for a young fellow to marry in this far-away country. And as for Walter Grant, he's an idle, loafing kind of body; no sensible girl could count him with my lad. Shall I speak to the girl's father?—or what can I do?"

"Do?—just nothing at all. You sit still and look on, if you don't want to get your head broke in the stramash. The young ones will do without your interference. I was not sure of your feelings, but you might keep the Grants out of the way, though I think Walter is likely

to be the danger ; she might take a fancy to George."

"Walter Grant!—oh, nonsense, O'Hagan! She scarcely knows him ; she always keeps close to Ned."

"And looks at Walter with those mischievous eyes. Well, well, good night ; time will show. Only remember," he said, laughing and putting his head within the door again, "a laughing woman with two black eyes is the veriest devil of all. It's a woman you see, and not a serpent, in your Eden."

Poor McLean went to bed sadly disturbed, but he awoke in the morning more reasonable, and would not vex himself about the inevitable—and besides, he liked Zara. If Barton liked her too, he would not blame him ; and as for Walter Grant—it was absurd !

At breakfast Ned proposed to Zara to accompany the Grants part of their way home. Zara kept close to Ned, as she had done all the previous day, and was more silent than when they were alone together, and his heart rejoiced. As they came in sight of the forest, Zara's horse shied at the blackened stump of a tree—per-

haps he thought it was a native. The track was difficult, and encumbered with tree-stumps, and holes from which the trees had rotted and fallen, and the horse in his rapid course lamed himself against a stump concealed in long grass. Zara managed to keep her seat, and in a moment Ned was beside her, with oneh and on the chestnut's rein.

"You are not frightened?" he asked, in a low, hurried voice—"not hurt? Thank goodness this did not happen yesterday, when we were far from home."

He stooped and looked at the horse.

"He is badly lamed. We will shift Miss Dawson's saddle on to my horse, and you, Walter, must take her home. I will come on with this lame brute."

In vain Walter protested against this arrangement—they would wait, and all go together. Ned over-ruled him, and settled the matter.

Late at night Ned came home with the chestnut; he had walked all the way. Zara heard him come in, and stole out of her room, where she had been sitting, still dressed.

"How good you are to me!" she said with wistful eyes—for at least she could recognise his patience and unselfishness.

The tired man was soothed and repaid. After this he gave himself up more and more to her influence, but he was not restless and agitated because she was near. The present was so sweet that he feared to disturb it with any shadow of the future.

The days passed rapidly and pleasantly. The Grants and O'Hagan were often at the Creek. Zara did not appear to avoid Walter Grant now, nor did she look troubled when he sang; and it was to Ned she gave her sweetest, most winning smiles. Many an evening passed in singing, and McLean would contribute some wild song, learned long ago amongst the Argyleshire heather. Passing through the kitchen one night, on his return from visiting a man who was sick at the huts, Ned stopped to ask Christina to send some broth to the invalid, and found her leaning against the open door.

"Whisht, lad!" she whispered, "div ye no hear the maister's singin'? Yon chiel O'Hagan is just the daftest body; he's aye pittin' th'

others to their mettle—and the maister's daft, tae, ever sin' he kent O'Hagan. Ye'll mind the Christmas nicht,—Guid save us! I thoct he was fey yon night. Is he no fey the noo?"

"Fey!—he's the most sensible man in the world—and I like to hear him sing. Why should he not be happy too? God bless him!"

"Ye suldna speak o' th' Almighty and happiness in the same breath. There's nae happiness but in heaven. Div ye no hear the maister's sang noo?"

"There's nae sorrow there, Jean, there's nae cauld nor care, Jean,
The world is aye fair i' the land o' the leal,"

chanted the woman, low and softly, after her master.

Walter Grant was at the piano. Zara sat near him, in a low wooden chair that Ned had made for her, and George laid down the *Sydney Gazette*, saying,

"Walter, sing that old song of yours, 'When Lubin sings of love's delight.' I am sure Miss Dawson will like it."

Like it! Ned came in and spoke to O'Hagan in low tones, and rapidly, but as he spoke he

watched the girl, and wondered what could be the power that Grant seemed to have over her, and why her eyes filled with tears.

“You remember,” he said, “that the chestnut was lamed out hunting the other day? He shied at a tree-stump. We said at the time, ‘One would think a black was hiding there.’ There was a black. I thought I should be set down as a fool if I said anything, but to-night three came up to me, whining and begging, in their wretched jargon, and as I was in the act of giving them a trifle, not liking their villainous looks, a fourth man drew up, made them some sign, when they left me, and I distinctly heard the fourth, who was bigger and stouter than the others, say, ‘You cursed fools had got hold of the wrong man!’ He was, of course, a white man in disguise. They must be scouts, for some evil purpose. What? I have not said a word to anyone else.”

“H’m!” said O’Hagan, gnawing at his moustachios, as he always did when he was perplexed. “The district has been very quiet, except for that trouble of the Grants awhile ago; but I do not understand about the white rascal.

You must, however, remember, Barton, that this thirst for gold, that is gaining ground fast, will induce lots of blackguards to wander about, in hopes of making a hasty fortune. I was only talking of the Port-Philip gold-fever to McLean just before you came in, but the good, honest fellow is not likely to be bitten by the rage."

"And I, too," said Ned, smiling, "am likely to stand and fall with him. Steady work is better than sudden wealth."

"Keep a still tongue, Barton. I will warn McLean, and those clever asses, the Grants, and my troopers shall keep a sharp look-out. Those fellows were only spies, of course; perhaps they had got wind of old Dawson being here, and thought him worth a power of money, and took you for him, and meant to have a look at the linings of his pockets."

O'Hagan laughed.

"Miss Dawson," he said, bowing, "come and be my partner at *Vingt-et-un*—partner for life I cannot ask you to be, without playing false to the prettist creature you ever saw. I met her at a race-ball in Cork, and she riddled my heart with holes—the doctors thought I shouldn't live,

I give ye my word, but they gave me a chance in Australia. Ye're well aware ye can live in the Bush without ever a heart!"

"I never know whether you are in jest or in earnest, Mr. O'Hagan," said Zara, who was a little afraid of the Irishman.

"Faith, then, I was never more in earnest in my life!" he replied, drawing a chair to the table for her, and giving Ned a most meaning nod over his shoulder.

CHAPTER VI.

ZARA went with her father to Warwick for some weeks. He wished to see his agent installed there, and personally to inspect the buildings in course of erection. But they had given the Grants a promise that, on their return, they would pay them a visit at Daroo.

The first week at Daroo was very happy. McLean or Ned went home each day to keep affairs in order at the Creek, and Zara received the young man, when he returned, with that flattering manner, half eager and half shy, that means more than words. Ned so interpreted it.

He had tried to leave Laddie behind, but it was no use, the faithful beast followed him always, coming in sometimes long after his master had arrived, having missed the moment of

his setting out. Coming down to Daroo late one evening, under large and brilliant stars, Ned brought in his hand a bunch of acacia, and obtaining leave, he wound the soft almond-scented yellow tufts of blossoms with the shining green leaves in Zara's dark hair.

"Did you happen to see or hear any word of O'Hagan whilst you were at home, Barton?" asked McLean.

"He had been down to the station with a couple of troopers yesterday, and was going off to Surat, Christie said, but that he would be back again soon."

Ned looked earnestly as he spoke into McLean's face, and fancied he could read there more than usual determination; the grey eyes seemed to flash under the heavy dark brows, and the lines about the mouth were stern.

Just as they were going to bed, McLean touched Ned's arm.

"I do not know," he said, "if Christie is right with some of her old Scotch sayings, and that one can scent danger in the air. I must get our guests home to the Creek to-morrow. Dawson is not a coward, but he is heavy and getting

old, and then the girl—— If there should be trouble in the country, robbery and such like, I can depend on my own people, but I doubt Grant's."

The two men looked each other in the face, and then McLean went on :

"I was down in Grant's humpies to-day, and the spirit amongst his men did not seem to me good. They would perhaps not go against him, but in case of trouble they would only look on. George is a fair master, but Walter is too severe and short with the men ; his English ways won't serve him here—these people are 'helps, hands,' not servants, and he has some old convicts about him. I am uneasy, Barton, for the Dawsons. You know Grant had a scrimmage with the natives, and he turned some of his fellows adrift after that ; a little bad feeling, like leaven, goes a long way. What have you done with your horse ? can you get him up if you want him ? Mine is in the stables. 'Tis wise to keep open a way of escape under all circumstances. I hardly know what I mean by escape, though."

A curious smile crossed Ned's lips as he

wished McLean good night, and said, "She shall have no cause to fear, as long as we are able to defend her."

He lay down with his pistols loaded beside him, and fell into a dreamless sleep, for he was tired with exercise. He was awaked by a low growling from Laddie. The night was dark. Ned listened, but heard nothing. The dog came close to the bedside, and stood there still growling, but very softly, for he knew his master's attention was aroused; all that could be seen was the gleam of Laddie's eyes gazing full in his master's face. All was still, and Ned in his weariness dropped asleep again, as he sat upright in bed, from which he was awakened by a nip at his hand from Laddie's teeth. The faithful brute had stood over and watched him, and now snuffed loudly at the crack under the door. Fully awake, Ned got up, hastily put on his clothes, and listened. There was no mistaking the "pad, pad" of the bare foot of a native underneath his window; and presently there was a sound as if a large animal had rubbed itself against the kitchen door. Some one was trying if an entrance could be effect-

ed. Ned pulled a pair of thick socks over his boots, locked his door on the outside, and groped his way along the passage. As he passed Zara's door, he made a sign to Laddie, and whispered to him "Watch!" The animal looked wistfully at him, as if to protest, but stood with ears cocked and frill round his neck all set. Ned stroked the dog's cold nose, and went to awake McLean, who silently rose and dressed, and took down his gun; and then having locked his door on the outside, he waited in the passage, whilst Ned went on to rouse the Grants. Just as he did so, many feet pattered round the verandah, and a rush was made against the front door, which, however, resisted the efforts to force it. The Grants had spared no pains upon their cottage, and it was better built than are many of the settlers' houses. The noise had awakened Zara, and, with a cry, she sprang out of bed and struck a light. McLean was standing by the dog at her threshold.

"Put out your light," he whispered hoarsely through the key-hole. "It is I, Andrew McLean. Come out to me; don't be afraid," he went on to the trembling girl, when she had obeyed

him, "there are some mischievous rascals abroad to-night, but I am near you. Dress quickly."

Down the passage came Ned and the Grants, with a dark lantern; they held a hasty council.

"I suppose we are besieged. Well, we must make the best fight we can, and fortify one room, at any rate."

"Miss Dawson's is the best protected. We'll get the women in from the kitchen, and entrench them there; there is a second door opening on the verandah, as a chance of escape."

"Some of the men may be up from the yard to help."

"Oh! they sleep like death; unless one of us can get out to them. I wonder how many the foe are? and who?"

Another rush was made from the outside against the kitchen door, and then a scream from the women-servants, who came flying into the main passage of the house.

"Go into Miss Dawson's room, and hold that infernal noise!" whispered Walter Grant, pushing the terrified creatures into the room. "Go in there and be quiet; no one shall harm you."

The poor things went, and hid themselves at once under the bed.

"My dear," McLean said, looking steadfastly at Zara, "Grant thinks this room the most easy to defend; the angle of the projecting wall outside protects it. No one shall touch you as long as we live. These marauders usually only want plunder. Are you afraid?"

"No," she said, but with a pale face, "bring papa here."

One of them went to fetch Mr. Dawson, and two others dragged the mattresses to the window and blocked that entrance, securing them with ropes; and then they lighted a lamp, as it could not now be seen from without. The light fell upon the metal on the stocks of Ned's pistols.

"Give me one of those," Zara said, going up to him with flashing eyes; "I shall learn to use it, if need be. Why are you all armed, even papa? You must not leave me out; weaker women than I have done deeds of daring. I am not afraid."

Thus passed a little time, the hurry of it was so great that, in after days, when

they told the tale, they often stayed thinking, Was that all?—and did so much happen in so few minutes?

The robbers had heard the screams from the women-servants, and had echoed it by a yell from without. Then the “hands” down at the huts of the station awoke, and cast about how they should contrive to bring aid to their masters, without endangering their own safety. Whilst they were deliberating they heard another shout, and a shot fired, and hastily arming themselves with weapons, offensive or defensive, they ran out.

Within the house were the five gentlemen, Zara, and the two women-servants, a man half groom, half valet, who had come from Hampshire with the Grants; and a boy, who slept in the stables, had crept to the groom’s window, and been let in by him;—a little band, well armed, and determined to sell their lives dearly.

The bush-rangers broke into the house, and turned into the kitchen offices, where there was food and drink. During the pause McLean whispered to Ned,

“Would it be possible for you to escape with

Zara to the woods?—the horses are near; take her up behind you. Could it be done?"

"I would not go," she said, "and leave you all here in danger," for she had overheard him, having joined them in the passage, in spite of their entreaties. There was a red spot on her white cheek, and her lips were firmly set.

"It is too late," answered Ned, with a look of agony; "there is no chance for us to get away unseen."

It was too late. The men came down the passage, entering the open rooms, and bursting into those that were closed, smashing everything from sheer wantonness. At the end of the passage, with Zara's room behind them, with its door of escape, which the boy was set to guard, stood the little band to receive the foe. Shots were fired, and some of the robbers fell wounded. There was shouting, and confusion, and flashing lights. The bushrangers stood at bay a moment before the determined aspect of these men, with a black-haired girl amongst them, who also held a pistol in her hand. And then a shout was heard outside, and a noise of many feet—not men only, but horses. Good God!

was it death or salvation? They did not turn their eyes on one another—they had to face their foes; but a long, sighing breath went out from each one's labouring breast.

The "hands," who were running up to the house on hearing the shot, saw, at some distance, in the grey morning light, a number of horsemen, at full gallop—mounted police. The day broke as O'Hagan and his troopers rushed in and relieved the little garrison. There was a short, fierce struggle, and then all was over; there remained a few wounded, groaning men, and some sullen prisoners. The crushing out of the hopes, and the successful baffling of the attempts, however evil, of misguided men, are always sorrowful matters of contemplation. The punishment and suffering of those unfortunate creatures do not further affect the course of this history. O'Hagan's troopers took charge of them—one man was dead, and three were severely wounded. Of the defenders, only the groom and George Grant were hurt; the latter was stabbed in the shoulder, and the former badly shot in the thigh.

"Just in the nick of time, was I?" said

O'Hagan, draining off a big cup of cold tea, and striding about the house to see what damage was done. "By Jove! in another half-hour it would have been all over with ye! Pray, Miss Dawson, had ye said your prayers before ye went to sleep? It's well for ye, for, bedad, ye might have waked in Heaven!"

The servants were setting their kitchen in order, frightened, but none the worse for the terrible night. Zara sat on a low stool, with her father's hand in hers, and Ned's pistol lying on her knee, very still, and not daring to speak, fearing to burst into tears. O'Hagan took the pistol up.

"You did not fire, I see," he said; "every barrel is loaded."

She shook her head.

"There was no need; besides, I must have fired through Mr. Barton, for his broad shoulders were always between me and harm. But I made him give me this, in case—in case I should be left alone."

"How came you here at all, O'Hagan? Did you hear any rumours about these ruffians? I never thought of help from you. The best we

could expect was for the men to come up from the huts."

"Faith, McLean, I did get rumours—rumours that put me off the scent altogether. Two days ago I got news of a band of bush-rangers that had joined with the black tribe who paid Grant a visit before. A wretched young scoundrel of a native came whining to me, telling me of robbers in the Surat neighbourhood, and up there I went. I left word at your station; but when I got to Surat I heard of a band going south, marauding along the river stations. I gave them chase, and yesterday, at a shepherd's hut, a boy told me that he had seen them turn in there, and stop some time drinking; that they took the hut-keeper with them, and tied him (the boy) to a post, where I found him. They said they were going to surprise Grant's station; for the blacks hated him for killing their dogs, and getting them hunted by the police; the white man who seemed the leader owed Grant a grudge for having been turned off by him, at a moment's notice, for some thieving business. They said it was a good chance to rob the station, for there were two

rich old coves there on a visit, and that they would get some plunder. You may guess if I rode. My throat was as dry as a lime-kiln, and I should have had no more wind in the bellows with another half-mile. Such an airy edifice, too, this of yours, Grant—doors and windows in all directions; no sooner had you protected one, than your foes would be in at another. You were caught like rats in a trap. If you had taken refuge in Miss Dawson's room, they would have burned the place over your heads; and if you had escaped through that door on the verandah, they would have shot you down one by one, unless the men from the huts had got up to you in time."

"The danger is over," said McLean; "do not let us talk more of it. I have sent a man to fetch a surgeon from the next station, where he is staying, to look after our wounded. Where is Barton?—not hurt, I hope?"

The colour came into Zara's pale cheek, and she looked up uneasily. Should she stay where she was, or could she avoid him? No one knew what was in her mind; they thought her nerves were shaken with the fight. But she feared to

see Ned's face ; she knew that, when he gave her the pistol, he had pressed her hand and whispered,

"Only as a last resource. Zara, darling, trust me—I fight for you. Whilst I live, do not you use it."

She knew that danger had made him bold ; she knew that sooner or later now she must answer the deciding question of her life, and she feared to see him. She knew, also, that, at the moment when the bush-rangers broke into the house, some one touched her, and a voice said close at her ear, "In death, at least!" and that voice was not Barton's.

Ned was sought and found, supporting the groom's head upon his shoulder, and soothing his cries of pain ; while beside him, on the floor, laid tenderly on a rug, was stretched Laddie, with his tongue hanging out, his long soft hair clotted with blood, and his leg broken. Ned had bound up his dog's leg, and bathed his hurts, and now dipped his spare hand in a bowl of water near him, and put it at intervals into the animal's thirsty jaws, for it was too weak to rise and drink.

Ned stopped there all day. Poor Hampshire Jim said that he could not rest, except on Mr. Barton's shoulder; and once, when Ned rose and crossed the room for something, Laddie seemed to fear he was going to leave him—he opened his loving brown eyes, wet with more than human tears, and gave a low faint moan.

McLean took the Dawsons home, though Zara would fain have stayed.

"You will hardly forget Daroo, I fear, Miss Dawson," said Walter, with a cold smile upon his lips. "I am sorry it should have been so painful a visit to you. The doctor says it will be some weeks before George can use his arm. I must stay with him. I shall not forget your courage."

She tried to say something, but only "good-bye" would come. Walter Grant turned back into his shattered house, with a bitter irony in his heart, that repeated, "If it had only been I that was wounded, and not George, I might at least have won some certain expression of regard." Hampshire Jim died that night; his mind wandered back to England and his mo-

ther's cottage, and talking to Ned, thinking he was his mother, he bade her kiss him before he slept, as she had often done when he was a child.

Ned rode slowly home next day, revolving many things, with his dog rolled in a plaid, across his horse's neck.

At first Zara had been a good deal subdued and shocked by the terrible night, but she soon recovered her usual spirits, and behaved in the half-shy, half-frank manner that is so perplexing to a man.

Walter Grant brought news of his brother one afternoon, and put up his horse for an hour. He found Zara reading aloud to McLean, Ned's cockatoo perched on her shoulder, and Laddie lying at her feet. Poor Laddie, since he had been told to watch her, had never lost the recollection of his trust, and would limp to where she sat, and look at her with his honest eyes, as if he would read her heart, and watch her every thought. Zara sprang up with some eagerness to meet Walter, and thanked him for the happy days at Daroo.

"And besides," she said, "I must praise your

own and your brother's bravery the other night."

"Not at all," he replied, with his scornful smile. "The only person who deserves any credit is Ned Barton. If he had not awaked we should all have been murdered in our beds. I never saw a cooler hand."

"Don't talk of it," she said, with a shudder; "I only wanted to thank you, for papa and I are going back to Sydney soon," looking at her father, who entered the room.

"And you wish to get home, of course?" said Walter, coldly, and with eyes that seemed to freeze her.

"I am anxious to get home," Mr. Dawson answered for his daughter. "There are various reasons why I should return," he added, slowly, looking at the young man, who had not taken his eyes from Zara's face.

The girl sat so that her father could not see the paleness that had crept over her cheek, nor her compressed lips and folded hands. Walter rose to go.

"Good-bye," he said, holding out his hand. "I suppose I shall not see you again?"

"I suppose not. You will say good-bye for me to your brother?"

Zara took up the pamphlet she had been reading to McLean, and quietly continued her reading, but without understanding one word.

Walter met Ned.

"Ride a mile with me, old fellow," Walter said affectionately to Ned, whom he met out at the paddocks, "if you are not tired. I want a word with you."

From the window Zara could see the two young men talking, Walter's arm thrown about Ned's neck.

"So the Dawsons are going, Ned! What! didn't you know it?" seeing Ned's blank look of surprise. "McLean knew it, but he said nothing. Of course, if he marries Miss Dawson, it will be in Sydney. I suppose the two men have settled it."

"McLean marry her! Nonsense!" cried Ned. "I have not yet found a moment in which to speak to her, but—don't laugh at me, Walter, as an impertinent idiot—I love her—I must have 'Yes' or 'No.' Going away! I shall ask her to-night. Walter, do you think she will

say 'No?' She has been so kind, so sweet to me! She meets me always with that winning——"

"That winning—smile," cried Walter. "I know. But how can I tell what she will answer you? You ought to know."

Ned looked crestfallen; he was frightened at his own daring aspirations, and he was hurt that his friend had not wished him good speed.

"Well, Barton, I must be jogging on faster, the sun is low. George will want me. Good-bye."

They nodded to each other, and parted; but, after a short gallop, Ned, looking back, saw that Walter had reined in his horse, and was riding very slowly.

"Poor Walter!" thought Ned; "he is cut up about his house and his brother. It is very natural he should not care about my fancies just now. But, still" (this thought would have its way), "I think I should have been glad to know of his happiness."

CHAPTER VII.

FORTUNE favoured Ned. Zara was sitting alone, and the sweet scent of the creepers on the verandah was wafted in at the windows on the Spring breeze. A book lay on her knee, but she was looking out over the lovely, swelling plains, with pale blue mountain ranges far away. Laddie heard his master's step, and softly wagged his tail. Zara, who was not so quick-eared, stroked him, but he did not respond to her caress. He opened his sleepy eyes, and fixed them on the door, and beat the floor in great excitement as Ned came in. Then Zara turned and looked at the young man, and though she smiled, he saw the tears in her eyes. He knelt down beside her, stooping to pat the dog, to hide his emotion.

"He is getting well, poor fellow!" he said, at last. "You have been so kind to him. He is fond of you now—he ought to be."

"Oh! no, not fond of me; he only obeys you. How he watches you, and hears your step, your voice! I did not think dogs were——"

"So like human beings?" he asked, "or so unlike them?"

"Unlike them. Human beings don't care for each other half as much as that creature cares for you."

He looked up suddenly into her face, with all his heart in his eyes, and said, in a low voice,

"Could you care for me, Zara, half as much? I love you."

Simple words, full of the deepest meaning. In the silent room they seemed to echo and re-echo. The bright colour came into her face.

"I have no right, perhaps, to ask you. I am not rich—I have not made a worthy position for you, but I shall, please God! Mr. McLean gives me every chance of success. I shall win fortune for you—if I may. I have seen you every day, and you have been kind. I have learned to love you—was I to blame?—could I

help it?—was I too bold? I suppose so; but still it remains the truth. I love you, Zara—I love you!”

Her white hand fluttered over Laddie’s sharp ears; she lifted it and laid it on Ned’s mouth to stop his words. He took it in his own like some delicate flower, and pressed it against his heart, and kissed it passionately, reverently, and she left it in his grasp. This young man’s innocent love was very sweet to her, though she did not fully value it. She yielded to its influence, and sat quite still, whilst he talked in short broken sentences of his happiness and his hopes.

“I shall bear your absence better, darling,” he went on, “now that our hearts are one. You will not forget me in the city, and I shall soon come and fetch you for my own. I know McLean will love you like a daughter. Some day we might go to England—you would like that. Oh! how proud I should be to take my wife, my treasure, and show her to my mother and sisters! You will like my mother, Zara; she is poor, but she is a lady. What shall I do without you? It is natural for you to

wish to go home for a little while, perhaps."

"Who told you we were going?" she asked, smiling at his bright, adoring face, and passing her hand over his thick curling hair.

"Walter Grant told me just now. I will try not to vex you about it, but believe that what you wish and do is best; still I hate your going away. I should like you to stay now and for ever. What do you wish me to say to your father?"

"Oh! Ned," she cried, in an anxious tone, "promise me you won't speak to papa yet—not till I give you leave. Promise me. Is it so much to ask of you?"

"Yes, love, very much; it is unfair, and not honourable, that I should be your lover without his knowledge. I wish him to know the engagement between us." Then, seeing a cloud upon her face, he added quickly and tenderly—"Darling, I will of course do whatever you wish; but have you any reason to suppose your father would refuse you to me? Does he think I am unworthy of you? I know I am. I should still be unworthy if I were a Duke. But *you* don't think so; your father has always

studied your wishes, your pleasure—he would hardly cross you in this chief point in your life. Do you think he would refuse me ?”

“I do not know,” she said, with bent head.

“If you knew how much happier it would make me,” he pleaded, thinking she would yield. “Let me at least know what your motive is, dearest.” His strong, simple character disdained concealment.

“It seems as if I were asking you a favour,” she said softly—she was on the point of saying, “You are beginning early to show your force of will against mine,”—“well, then, I do ask it of you as a great favour, don’t say anything till I give you leave. You know papa was a good deal shaken by the night at Daroo. He is not at all well, and it is not a good opportunity to speak to him.”

He said nothing to this view of the matter but “Very well—I leave it to you, Zara, as a proof of my love against my better judgment;” but he looked very grave and sad. In reward for his self-denial, she bent her head towards him; he put his arm about her and kissed her several times in haste, for they heard Mr. Daw-

son and McLean coming round the verandah.

Whether Mr. Dawson observed anything unusual in Zara's manner, or whether he saw Ned's eager anticipation of her wants during the evening, or whether, as is most probable, he was himself ill-at-ease, he kept her with him after he went to his room, asking her advice about some alterations in his house at Sydney.

"I am glad, my dear, that you seem pleased to return home. I own I am anxious to go, for business reasons, but I was afraid you were so happy in your wild, free life, that you might dislike going back to Sydney. There are various reasons why——"

"Dear papa, I am quite ready to go home—I wish to go."

"Well, Zara, I have been thinking this was hardly the proper place for a girl brought up expensively, as you have been."

Zara smiled a little contemptuously, but her father went on—

"There is no lady's society here for you; I have been lately afraid I was wrong in not thinking of that."

"I think it is much pleasanter without other women."

"Perhaps so, my dear; you have had your own way more, and done exactly as you pleased; but still, perhaps, I ought to have taken more care of you. All our friends here are very nice and agreeable, but——" Mr. Dawson hesitated and cleared his throat—he had some difficulty in getting on—"is any one of these gentlemen quite fitted to make you a good husband? I don't say I should actually have refused McLean or O'Hagan——"

"But *I* should have refused them, papa," she said, with mock gravity; and then, seeing an uneasy contraction of his brows, she laid her hand coaxingly upon his. "Between you and me, Mr. O'Hagan does not particularly like me, *I* know." With a little toss of her head. "He is very polite, but he has no opinion of my sense or my acquirements, and dear Mr. McLean considers me something rarer than a doll, who ought to be kept under a glass case."

Mr. Dawson looked rather mystified—he certainly did not regard his daughter with either scorn or idolatry, but he was in a lecturing

mood, and went on with a high sense of fulfilling his duty, and Zara sighed and listened.

“McLean is a most excellent man—a good deal older than you are, to be sure, and he is extremely well off. O’Hagan, too, is a gentleman—a real gentleman, and could give his wife a good establishment; but, of course, if you do not care for either of them, there is no more to be said. Then of these three young men, kind-hearted young fellows as ever lived, George is the only one that I should feel happy to see you marry. He is steady and sensible, and will do very well cattle-farming. I am supposing that you prefer a country to a town life, which I used to doubt. Barton is a good, honest fellow, and McLean might make him his heir, for he thinks a great deal of him; but he has no means whatever, and Walter Grant has mistaken his vocation, and is not fit for the bush at all, with his reading, and his poetry, and languages, and his pretty talents, his elegant ways, and his supreme scorn of everything colonial. He ought to go back to England and the bar—it is the only life he is fit for. No, George is the man for me.”

"And I don't like George at all, papa, so we will not talk of this any more. I know you are very tired, and you will not go to sleep to-night."

"One word more I must say, though I do not wish to doubt your discretion or your good feeling; but you have no mother to tell you things that are considered honourable in a woman's conduct. If you do not like any of these men, you should be careful not to give them false hopes, not to attach them to you, you meaning nothing by your apparent preference. I have said this, Zara—don't think me hard or unnecessarily careful, because I fancied—perhaps it was only fancy—that both Barton and Walter Grant are desirous of your regard."

Zara said not a word, but presently kissed her father and wished him good night.

Alone in her room, she thought over the past day and her father's remarks. She had already given a virtual promise to one of these men—she had already committed a breach of *what is considered honourable in a woman's conduct*. Poor Ned! she liked him so much, she admired his good looks, his courage and manliness. But

was he the man she would have chosen out of all the world? He had come to her to-day in a moment of weakness and bitter feeling. A hasty anger and an unreasonable disappointment had possessed her; and Ned's sympathy, his affectionate solicitude, found her ready to be soothed and gratified, and not ready to be true to herself. Was her father right? Were none of these men really fitted to make her happy? Would she prefer a city to a country life? She plunged her hands into her thick black hair, dissatisfied with herself, and already repenting of her hasty acceptance of Ned's warm boyish heart.

But Zara did not long give way to fruitless cogitations—her nature was ready at expédients; if she had made a false step, it must be retraced, and without delay—but how? Angry scenes and recriminations would hurt her own pride and self-love too much. No, things must be so arranged that her broken engagement would seem to happen naturally; and besides, she did not want to grieve Ned, and her pulse quickened with pleasure when she thought of the fond greeting she should receive when she

met him on the morrow in the garden. She would hasten her departure for Sydney, and there the long distance, the many distractions of life, would soon enable her to carry out her purpose; there she would at least not see his pain at what she should feel it right and necessary to tell him.

"Yes," she said aloud, "we will go away at once, and matters will right themselves. Poor dear Ned! I will be so kind to him till then."

As she rolled up her long dark hair, and stood with her little bare feet, and her head bent, looking so childlike in her straight night-gear, she said in a sadder, lower tone,

"I wonder what Walter Grant means! Once or twice I could have thought—but then comes his scornful smile, and he behaves as if it were the greatest condescension to speak to me."

Zara's expedient was unavailing for once. Mr. Dawson did not sleep that night, nor for many nights afterwards. The shock at Daroo had greatly disturbed him, and never strong, having lived a quiet, comfortable, uneventful life, and being somewhat self-indulgent, he was surprised

by severe illness, that left him too prostrate to be able to travel. Zara fretted—she was in a state of nervous excitement with the fluctuations of her father's illness—she could ill conceal her great desire to leave Darling Downs, and return to Sydney. Ned, overjoyed to see her still near him, at whatever cost, was often grieved by her pre-occupation and restless anxiety to be gone. He was very modest in his estimate of his own merits; he told himself it was natural that a young, beautiful girl, much admired and sought after, should wish to go back into fashionable life, after the long, monotonous weeks she had spent in the Bush; but sometimes he wondered how he should make her happy when she was his wife. Riding home sadly, late and alone (for he was very busy looking after the wilder cattle, and seeing them regularly herded, before being brought into the main camp for branding), he sometimes thought he would ask her frankly if she had made too hasty a bargain—if she would not be happier to return home free, and choose there a partner for life, whose ways and education should be more like her own. When he went in, perhaps

he found her alone, and she would receive him with so kind a greeting, her caress would so effectually disarm his fears, that he forgot everything else in the joy of the moment ; and he blamed his doubts—was he not the happiest, the most fortunate of men ?

Zara nursed her father tenderly.

McLean had never questioned Ned, but the instinct of affection had put him in possession of the young man's secret, so that whenever he could give Ned time for an hour's ride he would himself plead business, or fatigue, and leave Zara to his care.

George Grant was quite well now, and busily employed ; and Walter, riding one day, had met Ned, and asked him point-blank how his wooing had sped, in so eager a tone that Ned, thinking it meant deep interest in his welfare and happiness, answered frankly, his handsome face beaming with pleasure ; but he added, at the same time, that, owing to her father's bad state of health, Zara wished the subject not to be made public at present. Walter gave him joy, and wrung him by the hand, and rode on to Warwick, where he spent so many days, that

George sent for him, for he wanted his help on the farm. O'Hagan came to the Creek, and Mr. Dawson was delighted to chat with him. The kind-hearted Irishman seemed to bring a fresh stock of marvellous stories on every occasion; he was too keen an observer not to discover very quickly the position in which Barton stood towards Miss Dawson, but one evening he had watched Ned carving delicately a box of cedar wood as he sat near Zara, who had lately begun to sing, to Ned's immense delight, and he whispered to McLean,

"I am sorry for that boy; she will lead him a dance yet, or I am mistaken; he's too good for it. I warned ye before, McLean, to keep him off the rocks ahead."

"Ay, ay," said McLean. "You know our proverb, 'Gin a man will to Cupar, he maun to Cupar.' I hope all will go well."

The Grants did not come over, and Zara began to accustom herself to the daily companionship and unselfish affection of her lover. She was not one to harass herself or him needlessly; she would at least make the most of what pleasure she could get, and preferred to

see a smile upon his face. She sang to him, with him ; they amused themselves, teaching and learning from each other ; she wandered about the garden with him, she wore the flowers he brought in for her ; she let him wind the white virgin's bower and the scarlet bignonia in her hair ; she rode with him into the forest, with its grand cedar and pine trees, musical with the bell-bird, magpie, bronze pigeon, and brilliant with the green, striped, and scarlet and blue Lories.

These were days of enchantment to him ; although she would never let him speak of the future, and the caresses she accepted from him were few and far between, he thought, with a curious self-deception, that wilfulness and waywardness only proved her true affection the more certainly. When Mr. Dawson recovered, Ned thought it was quite right that Zara should wish to re-visit her old home, and that there must be many things to do, many friends to see, before the blessed time that should make her only his. He urged her to let him tell her father, and still she prayed him off.

The day appointed for McLean's cattle-

branding approached, and the Grants had been asked to come over and bring some of their best hands to assist in the work. Several "mobs" had come from a distance, with calves that had not yet been branded. McLean had had a new brand made, bearing Ned's initials; for Barton had been investing all his savings in the purchase of cattle, with a view to renting and stocking a "run" for himself. McLean had strongly urged this upon him, in preference to what many squatters and settlers whom they met at Warwick and other townships often talked of now—the gold-diggings at Bathurst and in the neighbourhood of Port-Philip—a laborious, precarious means of obtaining wealth rapidly, and one surrounded by no ordinary privations and temptations.

Ned was very anxious to see his cattle—his own "mob." He was also an adept at lassoing cattle, and was a cool hand and good judge; there was a little pardonable pride in his wish to exhibit his skill before his lady-love, who had expressed a great desire to see the process of branding; though Ned would have dissuaded her from it, as it is at best a terrible sight.

CHAPTER VIII.

ZARA had at last yielded to Ned's petition to ask her from her father, after the cattle-branding was over, just before the Dawsons were to start for Moreton Bay, where they would meet the steamer for Sydney.

Walter Grant had been very undecided whether he would keep his promise and go to McLean's creek. In the morning he said he would go, and in the evening he changed his mind. But George treated his brother with uniform consideration, and only shrugged his shoulders, not attempting to bias him in either way. It was a vagary of Walter's, he thought.

Ned was busy at outlying stations, mustering cattle, and preparing the new fencing round the camp at home, into which the animals would be

driven. Before the eventful day he had driven in a particularly wild mob (called "Russians" in that country), and after a great deal of trouble, and many turns, charges, doubles, he succeeded in camping all the animals. He came home hot and dusty; he was not presentable in the garments he had worn all day, but he could not resist the pleasure of receiving a smile and nod from Zara, as he went round the verandah to his own room. He looked in at the open windows; the wind swayed the white muslin curtains to and fro, the cockatoo was balancing himself on the back of the highest chair, nodding, and dancing, and erecting his rose-coloured crest, and fresh flowers were in the room. Walter Grant sat at the piano, playing soft, dreamy music, and Zara, clothed in pale yellow muslin, with green ribbons, was hemming a neckerchief. She did not hear Ned's approach, so deeply was she immersed in her occupation, or in her thoughts. He stood for a minute, with the long, wistful gaze of a lover, before she lifted her eyes; Walter Grant, however, had seen the look, and observed her unconsciousness of it, and he smiled.

Zara started when she became aware that Ned was studying her, as if she feared he would read more than she wished to appear on the surface, but his guileless, unsuspecting nature saw only the beautiful face on which he desired to bring the smile of affection. The smile came, and Zara leaned out to her young lover, gave him the neckerchief, to wear on the morrow, and asked him, with some interest, if he was not tired.

He dressed hastily, and came back, looking brown, but fresh and happy, patted Walter on the shoulder, and asked him not to leave off playing. He then sat down on a low stool beside Zara, possessed himself of one little hand, concealed by the foldings of her gown, and whispered low, happy words.

Walter looked pale and discomposed; he sat in the shady corner of the room at the piano, and sang all the evening—plaintive, despairing ditties. Zara seemed constrained, and was more silent than usual. George and Mr. Dawson talked politics. McLean and Ned alone looked happy; they were so truly friends that they shared each other's hopes and excitement,

and McLean was fully informed of Ned's engagement.

The night was hot, and when the gentlemen went out into the verandah to smoke, Ned asked Zara, with a loving word, if he should lift her rocking-chair outside.

"If you like," she answered, wearily, "but near the window. I like to hear Mr. Grant's music."

He pressed the listless hand that hung over the arm of the chair; she coloured violently, and shook it free. Walter, in the shadow, saw this little action in the light, and once more he smiled. He awoke from his dreamy playing. Every love-song he knew flowed from his gifted tongue, ending with Schubert's lovely serenade. His voice ceased, his fingers alone warbled amongst the chords, and then were still. He was about to close the instrument, when, seized by some inspiration, and looking at the pensive attitude of the motionless figure in the window, he sat down again, and sang, with exquisite pathos, L. E. L.'s sentimental though rather high-flown ballad, "Weep for the love that fate forbids."

By the middle of the first verse Zara's eyes were full of tears; at the end of the last, having tried in vain to suppress her emotion, and stem the flood of weeping, she rose quickly, and, without a word, fled for refuge to her own room.

Walter came slowly to the window, leant against the frame-work, and looked out over the beautiful, undulating, park-like country, backed by far-away hills of every variety of form, all tinted in soft grey shadows. Then he dropped into the chair Zara had quitted, and sat silent.

Ned accounted to himself for Zara's petulance and emotion by saying she was tired, and the day had been hot.

The next morning broke with a slight haze, that cleared before a glorious sun. The gentlemen appeared at breakfast in costume fit for stock-yard duties—breeches and long boots, and striped flannel shirts, worn loose at the throat. Ned had the pretty blue kerchief Zara had given him fastened under his collar in a sailor's knot, and instead of the usual leather belt round the waist, he wore a large, twisted, coloured handkerchief.

"You look like a matador in that brilliant

costume," Zara said, when she met him, and gave him her bright smiles as amends for last night. She was rather pale, and her eyes looked heavy, as if she had not rested well. He noticed it, and said,

"Darling, do not come down to the camp all day; it is not an agreeable scene. I do not think I ought to let you come at all; but, if you wish it very much, you had better go with me now, and see the first part, or come down later and see the last. You look tired now, my dearest!"

"Oh! don't," she said, in a tone of ruth, almost of despair.

The three young men went out together; McLean followed. Zara said that Christina was very busy and wanted her, for Mr. Dawson had promised "the hands" a supper before he left the station, and Christina was making preparations for it.

But Zara was very restless; she went into the kitchen for a short time, she wandered about the house, sat down to the piano, but its sounds made her heart throb and ache; then she looked out of the window, thinking how

soon she should be far away, and never look upon that scene again. She heard the men's voices, and the lowing and bellowing of the cattle in the distance; and she almost thought of going down to the camp at once, but as she crossed the room she saw lying on the sofa, where he had left it yesterday, Walter Grant's whip; she took it up, and almost unconsciously carried it away in her hand. She heard footsteps. No, she wanted to see no one. She took her broad hat and passed out of the room by a passage at the back of the house, into the garden. There was a low wooden bench under the shelter of some wattles; there she sat, with the whip across her knees, and the words of Walter's song ringing in her memory, and she hid her face in her hands and wept.

"Zara," a voice whispered, "Zara, you cannot be false to your own heart—you dare not! Why have you avoided me? and what do these tears mean? Do you love me?"

"Oh, hush! you do not know what you are saying—you do not know about me," she moaned, with her hand still pressed to her face. "Pray go and leave me."

"I know all there is need to know—that we love each other. I shall not leave you now—nothing shall ever come between you and me again. I claim you mine; you will not flirt with me—that is all over; never mind about the past, the future is mine."

She trembled as he spoke, and as he laid his arms about her. Was this passionate man the elegant, scornful young dandy? She was almost afraid of him.

"Why did you weep so last night," he went on, "when I was singing? You loved me. I can sway your soul. It is folly to dally longer with what we both know to be true; you know you love me, and you feel that I love you."

He drew her hands from her face with gentle force, looked earnestly at the down-dropped curved lids with their long sweeping lashes, and kissed the glowing cheeks still wet with tears.

"Don't be foolish, darling; you know we shall be wretched apart; you know there is no such word possible for us now as—part. Zara! you have nothing to do with anyone else in the world but me. There is no one but me—I am your world. Ah! what a braggart I am! Give me

the right to say this in face of that blue Heaven, Zara!"

A flutter passed through all her frame, and she looked up with the shy, frightened manner of an animal that is caught, and would seek to escape.

He kept his arm still about her, just as one would do to prevent alarming a terrified creature. She gave a low sobbing cry of "Walter!" and flung herself upon his breast. Then all was still.

Tired of the noisy stock-yard, Walter Grant had walked back to the house, as there were plenty of helpers without him. He had formed no distinct plan of seeing Zara, but he was ruminating how he should speak to her alone, before she returned to Sydney.

Ned saw his friend prepare to leave the ground, and for a moment wished he could have gone himself, but the post of danger and duty that he held could not be forsaken, and he only crossed the camp to the spot where Walter stood outside the rails, and said,

"If you don't return immediately, old fellow, you might as well ask Miss Dawson when she

will come down. Will you wait to accompany her? for I think it very likely her father won't feel inclined to come."

Walter had not found Zara in the house, but, seeing his whip was gone from the sofa where he expected to find it, he fancied he must have left it in the garden. There he went in search of it; there he found it on her knees.

Late in the afternoon Mr. Dawson proposed to his daughter to walk down to the camp. She would gladly now have remained at home, but she knew not how to excuse herself, having expressed so strong a wish to go, and she feared both McLean and Ned would be disappointed at her non-appearance.

She made herself ready, and went with her father and Walter. The great fire was burning for heating the brands, and the ground was dusty from the trampling of beasts. There was a great stir and noise of men passing to and fro—voices talking and shouting, cracking of great stock whips, and the bellowing and surging of cattle. But the camp was cleared of half the animals that had occupied it in the morning—they had been told over, or marked,

and then turned adrift, to rush terrified and in pain to their own haunts.

In the middle of the yard stood Ned, his tall, athletic figure showing to advantage amongst the other men, from the attitudes into which he was obliged to throw himself. A smile lit up his handsome face as he saw Zara approaching, and he waved his broad hat to her. In all the noisy crowd he was silent. McLean had had a strong, raised platform run up outside the camp fence, on which Zara could see the operations in safety. He came up to the railing when he saw his guests, and stood describing to Zara the difference in the cattle.

“Barton is branding some of his own beasts now; he is wonderfully active and quick-eyed. See that dun cow?—he will catch her and the calf next, the half-dozen huddled in the far corner are his. That young bull there I made a present to Barton. He is newly imported—a Durham. Barton may find him troublesome.”

Several cows and calves were turned off whilst McLean was talking, and presently Barton approached the bull. But the animal would not allow him to come near him; round and round

the yard they went, the bull growing more angry, and lashing his sides with his tail—snorting, bellowing, foaming, beating up the dust with his feet, and more than once dashing violently against the rails in trying to escape. Patiently Ned waited till he could throw his lasso—he did throw it, but the animal broke free, and Ned asked one of the men for his “roping stick,” which was given him—a sure instrument in his cool hands.

“Barton is tired of the dance,” said McLean ; “he’ll have the fellow this time. Put Miss Dawson up there, Grant, when they have caught the bull ; for the men will slip the rails to let him go the minute he is branded.” And he walked further into the yard, to watch the young man’s movements.


The bull stood, stamping in front of Ned : as he pushed his hair back from his face, his heart gave a great leap to think Zara was looking on. He waited patiently for the next rush or charge of the bull, ready to hurl the “roping stick.” There was a great silence, All at once the bull turned round and rushed with its head down between its feet straight to

the side of the enclosure where Zara stood. She started back with her hand on Walter's arm.

"Jump up, darling, quick!—on to the platform!" he said.

"I am not afraid, love, with you," she answered. Neither of them knew how loud they spoke.

They looked each other in the face. They were alone; there were no other people near; the world had floated away from them. But Ned, having seen the infuriated animal's rush, had looked anxiously to where the girl was standing. He heard the words spoken—heard them with his heart rather than with his ears; he saw the expression upon the two faces, and a wild storm of jealousy and rage took possession of him. The eye and hand that had been so sure and calm a moment ago failed him now. Baffled by the strong iron bark fencing, the bull turned back into the yard, tearing up the dust, and charged straight at Ned, whose gaze, fascinated by those two figures outside, was no longer riveted upon the animal. He tried to steady his hand for the blow as the beast approached



In vain ; the cast fell short, and in another moment down went the young man before the stroke of his adversary—his bright hair all rolled in the dust—bruised and motionless.

“My God!” cried McLean, “the brute will turn and kill him!”

He seized a great “nullah-nullah,” the native war-club, from where it hung upon the rails, with other weapons, in case of need, and planting himself before Ned’s prostrate body, waited for the return of the bull, with lowered head to rend its foe, and dealt it a blow between the horns that staggered it, and enabled his men to catch and rope it firmly. It was branded with Ned’s initials, and then set at liberty ; when, maddened with rage and pain, it galloped bellowing to the ranges.

Zara screamed out when she saw Ned fall, but Walter laid his hand across her mouth, and entreated her to be silent. She clung to him trembling. Mr. Dawson had gone to McLean when the bull was roped, and helped him to draw Ned out of the yard. The young man was unconscious ; his eyes were closed, and his hands clenched ; he was dusty and

dragged, and there was blood upon his clothing. McLean's face was pale and stern. He gave his orders shortly for finishing the day's work, and then laid Ned upon the slabs of iron bark he had sent for, with a blanket from the huts, to make a rude litter, and walked silently beside it, as four of his men bore it home. A black messenger was sent on horseback to Warwick for a surgeon, and McLean watched beside the young man's bed until he came, made his examination, and pronounced him badly bruised and wounded, but that the real injury was in the head; he could not tell how the brain might be affected.

At night McLean walked into the parlour, looking pale and grey, and his face was very stern.

"I come to ask you," he said, in deep tones, "to pray the Lord with me for my boy's life. I am sorely smitten."

Zara knelt down weeping; in her secret heart she felt that, had he known it, she had dealt him a crueller blow than that the bull had inflicted; and the Grants knelt, as they used to do in their English home; but McLean stood, as

is the custom of his country, and with one hand leaning on the back of a chair, and the other stretched upwards, he poured forth glowing words, like those of the mighty men of old, who wrestled with God in prayer.

George Grant went home, but the Dawsons remained at the Creek. Zara begged to stay till she should know how it would go with Ned, and Walter Grant stayed with them, trying to be of some use to McLean, and hoping for a favourable opportunity to urge his suit with Mr. Dawson. McLean sat waiting for some change to come over the unconscious face, and looking every day more sad and stern.

“My word but the maister lo’ed the lad weel,” Christina said. “Ay, McLean, an’ he was a gude lad, but ye suldna hae fixit yer affections sae sair on airthly things, ye ken. The Lord hath smitten the gourd in which ye were sae fain, and ye maun learn to say, ‘His will be dune.’”

But Christina wept alone in her kitchen.







